Isaac Asimov ARM OF THE GIANT

# The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction

DECEMBER

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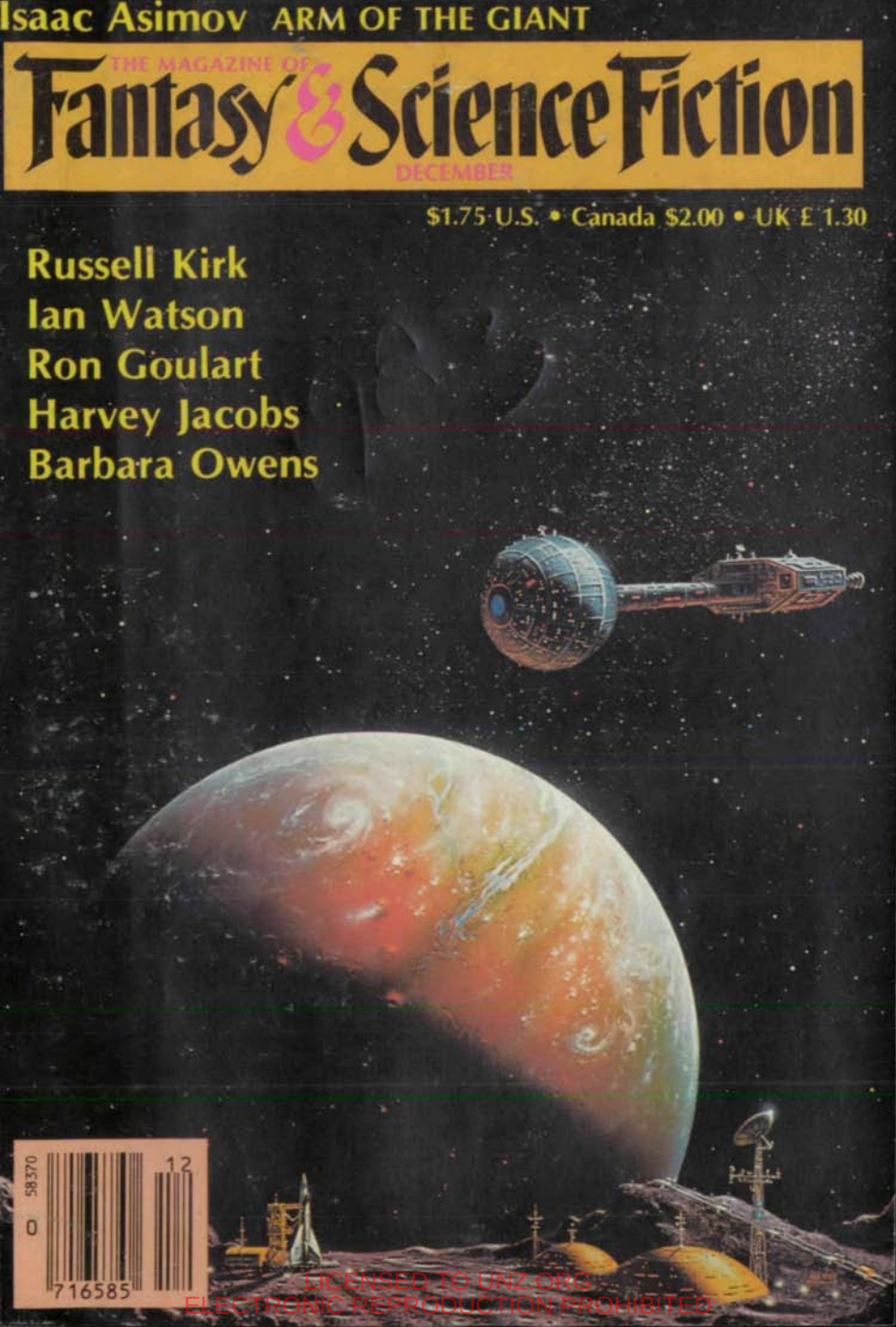

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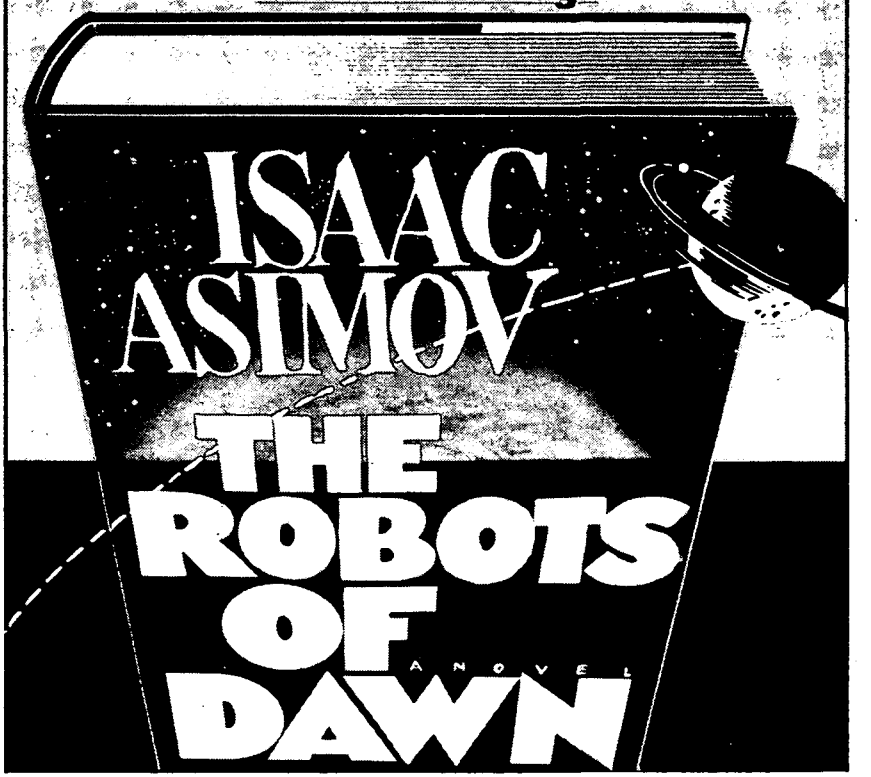


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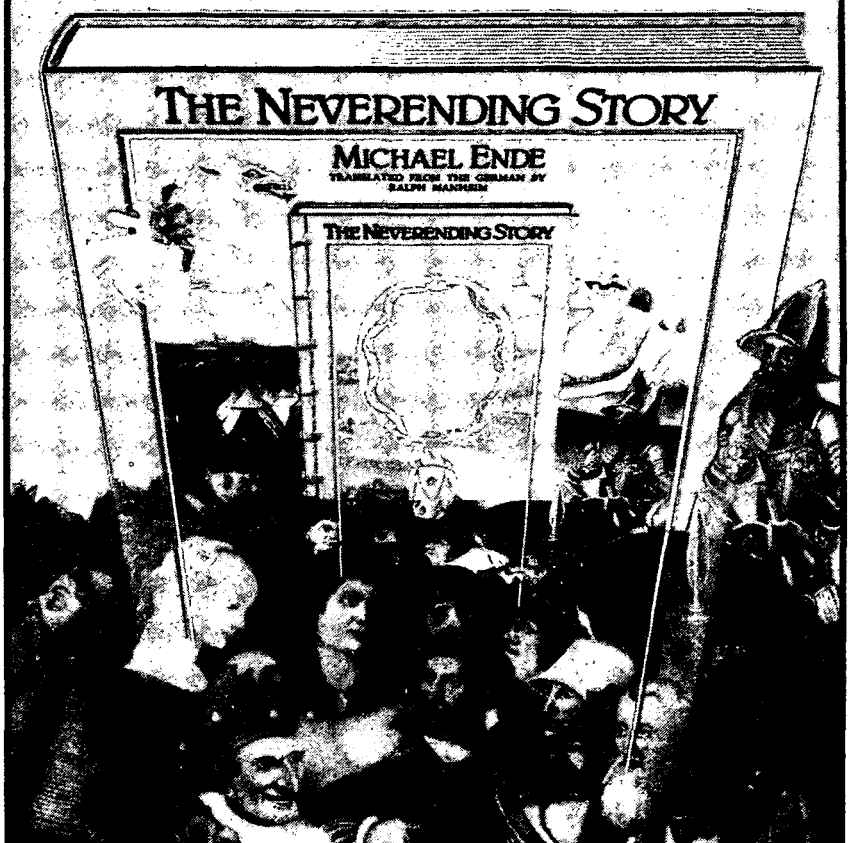


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*Russell Kirk has been contributing what he calls his "uncanny tales" to F&SF for some thirty years. This latest story — his longest here and we think his best — concerns the astonishing events which befall one Raymond Thomas Montrose, doctor of divinity, rector of the Church of the Holy Ghost. The story will be included in Mr. Kirk's latest collection, WATCHERS AT THE STRAIT GATE, to be published by Arkham House.*

# *The Invasion of the Church of the Holy Ghost*

**BY**

**RUSSELL KIRK**

*Some say no evil thing that walks by night*
*In fog, or fire, by lake, or moorish fen,*
*Blew meager Hag, or stubborn unlaid ghost,*
*No Goblin, or swart Faery of the mine,*
*Hath hurtful power o'er true virginity.*

*—Comus*

What occurred in my church last night must be committed to writing without delay. Having discovered my own feebleness, I do not know how long I might resist, should some other presence enter the church. Fork cast out the nightwalkers, and the girl, too, has gone, but there is no discharge in this war.

Perhaps the one devil who stared me in the face may gather seven other spirits more wicked than himself, so that my last state should be worse than my first. If such ruin comes to pass, at least I will have set down these happenings. Knowledge of them might preserve my successor at this Church of the Holy Ghost.

Successor? No likely prospect. Were I to depart, the bishop would lock the bronze doors — and soon demolish the hulking church, supposing him able to pay the wreckers' bills. Our bishop, saints forgive him, spends his days comminating the president of the United States and ordaining lesbians. The Right Reverend Soronson Hickey regards me as a disagreeable, if exotic, eccentric who fancies that he has a cure of souls — when every right-thinking cleric in this diocese has been instructed that the notion of souls is a fable. Had I been born white, the bishop would have thrust me out of the Church of the Holy Ghost months ago.



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Whoever you are, reading these scribbled pages — why, I may be dead or vanished, and the dear bishop may be my reader — I must first set down my name and station. I am Raymond Thomas Montrose, doctor of divinity, rector of the Church of the Holy Ghost in the parish of Hawkhill. This parish and the neighboring districts make up the roughest quarter of what is called the "inner city." I am an Episcopalian priest, the only reasonably orthodox clergyman remaining in Hawkhill, which Satan claims for his own.

Thomas is my confirmation name, and my patron is Saint Thomas of Canterbury. Like my patron, I stand six feet four in my armor. Yes, armor; but my mail is black leather, and I sleep with a pistol hanging from my bedhead.

A sergeant's son, I was born in Spanishtown, Jamaica, and I am shiny black: nobody excels me in negritude. The barmaids of Pentecost Road say I have a "cute British accent." I believe in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; the resurrection of the dead; and the life everlasting. I am celibate, not quite forty years of age, and since my ordination chaste of body. I have survived in Hawkhill a whole year.

My rectory is a safe-house, after a fashion. Occasionally I lodge behind its thick walls and barred windows — the builders of a century gone built more wisely than they knew — girls off Pentecost Road, fugitive from their pimps. The bishop admonishes me that this unseemly hospitality may give rise to scandal. I have replied that I do not desire carnal knowledge of these young women. It is their souls I am after. At such superstitious discourse the bishop scowls. Were I a pathic, he would not reprove me.

My Church of the Holy Ghost is Richardsonian Romanesque in style, erected more than a century ago, when red sandstone and Hawkhill were fashinable. The bishop has exiled me to the farthest frontier of his diocese, no other clergyman applying for my present rectorship. I accepted cheerfully enough a cure of souls in what the humorists of our daily press call the Demilitarized Zone of our city. Would that it really had been demilitarized. I did not obtain a permit for a pistol out of mere bravado.

The Church of the Holy Ghost, Protestant Episcopal, looms handsomely though grimly over Merrymont Avenue, three blocks east of the junction with Pentecost Road. (In the believing early years of our city, those names were not thought absurd.) Some fine old houses still stand on Merrymont: many more have been burned by arsonists (often hired arsonists) or have fallen into hopeless ruin. Where once our upper classes gloried and drank deep, the owl and bat their revel keep — or, more literally, the poorest of our poor get drunk and disorderly whenever they can.

I make no claim to have cured many souls near the junction of Pente-



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cost and Merrymont. Occasionally my Sunday services are attended by as many as seventy persons (in a building that might seat seven hundred), a good many of them immigrants (chiefly illegal) from the Caribbean like myself. There is a peppering of quiet little people from southeastern Asia, and a salting of old white folk stranded in Hawkhill by the pace of change in our city. One of the last group, Mrs. Simmons, still has money, which enables me to keep the church doors open. The bishop doles me out next to nothing for any purpose.

The sheltered broad steps ascending to the magnificent doors of my church are carpeted wall to wall, on clement days, by the Old Soldiers, winos and other derelicts; some bums sleep on those steps all night in summer, though not at this season. (Were I to let them lodge inside, they'd have the church befouled, looted, and desecrated within an hour.) A brace of policemen clear the Old Soldiers off the steps for my Sunday morning service. Some few of these Ancient Pistols even join my congregation, to escape snow or wind. I have made Anglo-Catholics of two or three.

Though less poverty-racked than Merrymont Avenue, Pentecost Road is more dreadful. For Pentecost Road has become the heart of the domain of the pushers and the pimps. Young women and female children of several colors parade on Pentecost in hope of custom; so do a number of boys, also for general hire. "If you want it, we've got it," is the legend painted above the entrance to the best-patronized bar on Pentecost Road. At the devil's booth all things are sold.

Besides believing earnestly in the doctrine of the soul, I believe with all my heart in Satan, whose territories are daily enlarged. I know myself for a castellan of Castle Perilous — my Church of the Holy Ghost looks like a mighty fortress — beset every hour by Satan's minions.

Reader, whoever you are, you might call me an educated Salvation Nigger. I am called worse than that, frequently, on Pentecost Road. Few of Satan's minions on that street know me for a man of the cloth; they are not numbered among my communicants. In vestments, and with my hair brushed, I look unlike myself in my Pentecost Road armor. When I tour the Pentecost bars I wear a greasy broad-brim hat and a very loud suit under my leather jacket. Somehow the word has been passed round that I am an unsuccessful chiropractor who likes his rum drinks.

I frequent Pentecost Road to snatch from the burning what brands I may. In this thankless labor I found an impossible coadjutor in the person of Fork Causland.

A source of the rumor that I am a chiropractor is Fork Causland's custom of addressing me as Doc. But I am in his debt for much more than that.

The first time I saw Fork, who will



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loom large in the pages of this document, he was descending nimbly from a bus — nimbly for a blind man, that is. Under his left arm he gripped a sheaf of placards announcing a wrestling match; these he was posting in the windows of barbershops and other small businesses. This bill-posting was one of the several means by which Causland supported himself, accepting no welfare payments.

I watched while he clanked his brass-shod stick upon the sidewalk and cried out to the world, in jovial defiance, "Northwest corner of Beryl and Clemens! Don't tell me I don't know where I am!"

Fork wore black goggles that fitted tight to his broad half-Indian face. Quite as invariably he wore, outdoors and in, a black derby hat — what would have been called a bowler, down where I was born. Although not tall, Fork was formidably constructed and in prime condition. His face-mask was the hardest visage that ever I have looked upon: "tough as nails," they say. Also, it was a face humorously stoical.

On that street corner I merely stared at Fork, who brushed past me to enter a cafeteria. It was a week later that I first conversed with him, in the Mustang Bar, Pentecost Road.

I was sipping a daiquiri — "pansy drink," a mugger type at the bar had growled, but I had stared him down — when somebody outside shouted, "The old Mustang! Wahoo!" Something rang upon concrete, and there bounced into view Fork Causland. I write "bounced": that is what he did. The burly blind man flung himself into the air, his left hand clutching the head of his stick; and he seemed to hold himself suspended in the air for half a minute, miraculously, his soles a foot or more above the pavement. Either Causland had a marvelously strong left wrist, or there was something preternatural about this blind man who could set at defiance the law of gravity.

Nobody else happened to be watching Fork's performance at that moment, but later I inquired among barflies about him. Some thought that Causland had been a circus performer in his youth, and had fallen from a high wire, destroying his eyes. Others said that he had been a sergeant of military police, blinded in line of duty. (If so, where was his pension?) Yet others suggested that acid had been thrown in his eyes when he was a strikebreaker, or perhaps a striker. Fork kept his own counsel. Surely that levitation-performance was odd, extremely odd; so were other feats of his, I was to learn.

"This old Mustang!" Fork announced again, very loudly, to an uncaring Pentecost Road. He passed through the open doorway of the Mustang to seat himself at the blond piano in the middle of the smoky room. (The Mustang reeks with marijuana.) "The regular, Ozzie," Fork called to the barman. A waitress fetched him a tumbler



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of cheap whiskey. Having tossed off half his drink, Fork began to play that battered piano.

I remember that he played "Redwing" — the taste of the elder spirits among the Mustang's patrons being oldfangled and sentimental; and he sang the lyrics in a melodious deep voice. "The breeze is sighing, the night birds crying ..." He elevated the lyrics from bathos to pathos. He was not a piano player merely, but a pianist, this blind chap.

I asked the waitress the man's name. "Homer Causland, but for the last two years they've all called him Fork." She added, sotto voce, "Don't give him no cause to take offense."

I shifted to a table beside the piano. "Mr. Causland," I said to him, "have you ever played the organ?"

"You're from Jamaica?" he responded, without hesitation. His head turned in my direction, the hard, taut face inscrutable.

"Not Long Island," I answered. "You've a good ear for speech, friend."

"That's part of my survival strategy. You a doctor, maybe?"

"Of divinity, Mr. Causland. I'm rector of Holy Ghost Church."

"If you need somebody to play the organ there, Doc, you could look further than me and do worse. What do you pay?"

We settled on five dollars a Sunday, all I could manage, but a substantial augmenting of Fork's income. I found that he could play Bach and Handel tolerably well from memory. Where Fork learned piano and organ, he never confided to me.

Pentecost Road took it for granted that Fork had "blown his lid" on some narcotic, so accepting his eccentricity. I found him neither mad nor half-mad, odd though he was. He was quick-witted, shrewd, and capable of serious reflection. From listening to records and tapes for the blind, he had picked up a miscellany of literary and philosophical knowledge. The recurrent extreme oddity of his public conduct — his acrobatic tricks (if such they were) and his shouting — I judged to be part of a general pose or blind (not to pun). Yet for what purpose this concealment of his real nature?

In the course of a month, I extracted from Fork and from others the explanation of his sobriquet "Fork." That account, set down below, may seem a digression; but it is bound up with the unnerving things that occurred during the past week at my church.

Pentecost Road respects one thing chiefly: successful violence, better even than riches. From such an act Fork Causland had obtained his familiar name and his high repute on Pentecost Road.

Occasionally fragments of conversation of a sinister bent may be overheard by a sharp-eared man who for drinks and tips plays the piano in



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rough saloons. In the Mustang, Homer Causland happened to gather enough of one tipsy dialogue to recognize it as a conspiracy to murder. He informed the police.

It was a gruesome, interesting case, that conspiracy to murder; but I am trying to be succinct. Despite Causland's warning, the murder in question actually was perpetrated — while the police were trying to fit Causland's testimony into the jigsaw puzzle of the suspected conspiracy. It was the killing, the prolonged and hideous slaughter, of a disobedient young prostitute.

Although Causland's evidence did not prevent the crime, it did enable the police to identify the three principal criminals, leaders of a "vice ring." They had been often arrested, yet scarcely ever convicted. Now the charge was homicide in the first degree.

With his accustomed stoic courage, Causland testified fully in open court; the police rarely had been able to produce so convincing a witness. Nevertheless, an intimidated jury and a judge who disgraced the bench found the three accused not guilty.

One of the accused was a Big Man on Pentecost Road: big in narcotics, big in prostitution. Generally he was called Sherm; sometimes Sherm the Screamer, from his accustomed mode of addressing young women under his control; also, perhaps, because of his talent for compelling other people to scream. He had been tried under the name (doubtless an alias, his original name being unknown in our city) of Sherman Stanton. He was a youngish man, lean, curly-haired, even handsome except for the persistent sneer on his face. Nobody knew where Sherm had come from before he began to dominate Pentecost Road's traffic in drugs and flesh.

Such talented and aggressive criminals build up a following of young men and women, moved by the emulatory passion, in such districts as Hawkhill. Sherm, despite his nasty manners and ways, obtained a large and devoted following. What was less usual, he riveted his grip upon his dupes by posing as an occult prophet of sorts. Oh, he was clever!

We have a sufficient number of queer creeds in Jamaica, but Sherm's pseudoreligion was worse than any of those. In some ways his rubbish — cribbed from paperback novels, possibly — resembled the cult of Thuggee. How much of his own mystagogy about Kali and Ishtar did Sherm the Screamer actually believe? He was after domination of minds and bodies — especially bodies, but he seems to have subscribed to some of his own devilish dogmas. He claimed to be able to project his essence out of the body, and to travel as pure kinetic energy through space and time. Also, he declared that he could not perish.

The pretense of exotic religiosity was of some utility to him. I am told



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that he tried to obtain exemption from property taxes for the storefront "church" that was his ring's headquarters; and he hired a lawyer to plead the first clause of the First Amendment when police asked for a warrant to search that "church." One detective remarked unguardedly to a reporter, "Hell, that 'Church of Ishtar and Kali' is just a kinky bawdy house."

When I write that some of us are engaged in a holy war, I mean that literally. We are a scant rear guard, and we are losing, here below, in this fallen age. Like the Celts of the Twilight, we go forth often to battle, but rarely to victory.

Satan is come among us as a raging lion, having great wrath. Sherm was a limb of Satan: that, too, I mean literally. He corrupted and peddled young girls for the pleasure of seeing them destroyed. He laughed whenever he had persuaded some fool to burn out his own brains on hard drugs. In our day the Sherms multiply and prosper. You have only to spend a year in the neighborhood of Pentecost Road to understand that Satan is a person and a conscious force, no figure of myth merely. He takes possession of empty vessels. On Pentecost Road I learned that the time is out of joint — and that though I could not set it right, still might I set my face against temptation, as did my patron Thomas à Becket. I digress: I must keep to the point, for the night cometh when no man shall work.

* * *

*But at my back in a cold blast I hear*
*The rattle of the bones, and chuckle*
*spread from ear to ear.*

Yes, Sherm and his friends were set at liberty. This enabled them to deal with Causland, whose testimony had come near to getting them life sentences. Sherm the Screamer did not tolerate informers on Pentecost Road. Blind Homer Causland knew what to expect.

Prosecutor and police conveniently forgot Causland, when the trial had ended in acquittal; they had plenty of fish to fry. Had he gone to the prosecutor's office, perhaps some nominal protection might have been extended to him; but Causland, a lone wolf, didn't bother. He hadn't the money, or perhaps the will, to leave the city altogether. Once upon a time Causland may have been good with a gun, possibly in the line of duty but a blind man has no use for such toys. All Causland could do was to wait upon the event, which might lie in the hand of God or in the hand of Satan.

On his way home from bill-posting one afternoon, Causland halted at a tumbledown secondhand shop. He had a speaking acquaintance with the proprietress, an alcoholic crone.

"What you rummagin' for today, Homer?"

"Garden tools, Mrs. Mattheson."

"Pardon me sayin' so, but I didn't never hear of no blind man growin' no garden." Mrs. Mattheson tittered at her own wit.



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"Why, Mrs. Mattheson, a blind beggar can make a compost heap. Do you have in stock such a thing as a pitchfork?"

She did: an old rusty one, the upper part of its hickory shaft somewhat split. Causland fingered the crack, asked for a small saw, and skillfully sawed off the upper portion of the shaft, shortening the tool by a foot. He paid Mrs. Mattheson sixty-five cents for this purchase, and a quarter more for a little old greasy whetstone.

Causland lived in a tall brick house that had seen better days — much better. So had his ancient Christian Science landlady. A battered cast-iron fence still surrounded the yard. The several tenants, whatever their moral attributes, were tolerably clean and quiet. Three effeminate young men occupied most of the ground floor. Causland had one room on the top floor; a narrow staircase was the only normal means of access. But Causland's room was one of three in which the Christian Science landlady, Mrs. Bauer, took a peculiar pride. Those three had, or could have had, dumbwaiter service. The dumbwaiter was a forgotten token of genteel living on Merrymont Avenue. Though nothing much had gone up or down the dumbwaiter for years, its electric controls remained operable.

Causland's room (which I saw for the first time only last week, when we had important matters to discuss) had been furnished by the landlady. It was an old-fashioned widow's room, actually, with austere straight-backed chairs, cane-seated, bought cheaply about 1900; a vast, heavy, venerable wardrobe; an old chest; a pine table; a narrow iron bedstead. Everything was desiccated, and the lace curtains seemed ready to disintegrate. Yet the room was clean. Blind men, I suppose, are indifferent to furniture styles and the hues of wallpaper.

The one feature of that room to relieve the eye was the glossy-varnished oaken door to the dumbwaiter. It was a large dumbwaiter — possibly it had been used for carrying firewood and coals, before the house's fireplaces had been bricked up and papered over — so that a slim man might open the door and climb into the contraption, if he chose.

Causland's lodging house stood on Merrymont, only three blocks east of my church. Here, in point of continuity, I digress again. By chance, one midnight I found myself strolling a few yards to Fork Causland's rear as he proceeded home. He was accompanied by boon companions, Old Soldiers, one on either side of him. It was a slippery winter night. The Old Soldiers reeled and staggered alarmingly, but Causland swaggered confidently between them, striking the sidewalk with his stick as he went, his derby roofed with snow.

"Where you livin' now, Fork?" one Old Soldier ventured. "Same place where — where you give it to 'em?"



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"Same place, my friend; old Mother Bauer's, top floor, hot as a frypan in summer and cold as James Bay these winter months."

"You don't have no bad feelin' about stayin' on there, Mr. Causland?" the other Old Soldier inquired. (This latter comrade was a white-bearded character known on Pentecost Road as The Ambassador from Poland.) "I don't mean a troubled conscience, like they say. I mean — well, like sumpthin might jump out an' grab you?"

"Ambassador," Fork Causland said to his second henchman, "keep on that way, and you'll earn yourself a split lip. Wahoo! Take me to old Mother Bauer's, boys, or I'll jump out and grab *you!* Wahoo!"

Then Fork performed another of those astonishing tricks of his. He took his stick between his teeth; flung himself straight upward with a muscular jump; as he descended, he thrust his rigid forefingers upon the arms of his tipsy companions. Then he rode along as if those two were his native bearers, his feet well clear of the ground, he seemingly supported only by those strong forefingers of his resting on the Old Soldiers' forearms.

His companions did not seem oppressed by his weight, though they kept their forearms extended and parallel with the ground, as if they had done Fork like service before. On they reeled for another block, Fork riding between them, chanting some old tune I did not recognize. When they were about to cross Thistle Street, Fork dropped back to the sidewalk to swagger along as before.

I never have seen such a thing done by anybody else. I do not know if this may have been some sort of acrobatic play. Surely the two Old Soldiers were no acrobats. I don't know how to convey the wonder that I felt at that moment. Was I wandering in a world of maya, of illusion? Could any man make himself weightless when he chose?

At some distance I followed the three companions to the walk that led up to Mrs. Bauer's house with the cast-iron railings. Causland slapped his comrades on the back, roared good night, and positively trotted all by himself up the steep steps of the porch, to vanish behind a handsome antique door. The Old Soldiers reeled onward, probably toward some cheap lodging house or Salvation Army hostel; I retreated to my citadel of a rectory.

But I am running ahead of my proper narrative. Of course the above nocturnal mystery occurred long after the battle at Mrs. Bauer's lodging house, which converted Homer Causland into Fork Causland. I turn back to the dumbwaiter and the compost fork. Causland had whetted well the prongs' points. I surmise that there must have been a faint smile on his hard-as-nails sightless face as he fingered the tines.

No police patrol cars rove Hawkhill at three of the morning. As



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Sergeant Shaugnessy said to me the other day, when I was imploring him for some effective help rescuing girls, "What's all the world to a man when his wife's a widdy?" At that hour especially, Hawkhill belongs to Satan's limbs like Sherm the Screamer.

Sherm brought with him to Mrs. Bauer's house, at three of the morning, nine of his boys. As matters turned out, it would have been more prudent to have fetched fewer helpers; but hubris now afflicted Sherm the Screamer. Having special plans for the informing blind piano player, he prepared to fend off any interference. Probably the original design was to snatch Causland, lock him into the trunk of one of the cars, and transport him elsewhere, to be tormented at leisure — perhaps in Sherm's "church." Sherm left the drivers in both of the cars, with the motors running quietly.

A merciful providence had sent Mrs. Bauer crosstown that weekend to visit a niece. Sherm's boys had successfully jimmied the front door when one of the three limp-wristed young men living on the ground floor happened to open the door of their apartment, intending to put out a milk bottle.

"What do you guys want?" he demanded. Eight men were filing into the corridor, all of them high on something costly. The tenant made out their faces. "Oh God! Billie, call the cops!" he screeched back to one of his friends.

They sapped him the next moment, and burst over his body into the ground-floor apartment. This taste of blood broke the invaders' fragile control over themselves. Roaring, they worked over the other two young men with blackjacks and bars. (One of those unfortunates was crippled lifelong, after that night.) The victims' screams roused the tenant at the top of the house. Causland always had been a light sleeper.

Instantly he understood what must be occurring below. In no way could he assist the ground-floor trio. The diversion downstairs gave him three or four minutes' grace, and for such an event he had made some preparation. Being a very strong man, he was able to thrust the huge wardrobe hard against his door. Back of the wardrobe he forced the iron bedstead. Thus, he filled completely the space between the doorway and the outer wall of his room. His door opening inward, this defensive strategy made it impossible for the door to be opened by his enemies, no matter how numerous and frantic they were: they might have to chop their way through with axes, or else use explosives. Either method would require time and noise. He was well aware of the possibility that so baffled, they might instead burn down the whole house, with him inside.

There was no salvation for him through a window — not three flights up, with no fire escape, and he blind. With admirable presence of mind, Causland took his whole cash reserve,



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seventy dollars, from his money belt. The bills and some private papers he concealed under the carpet. Then he took up his pitchfork.

Now the gang came roaring up the stairs and burst against his barricaded door. He recognized some of the voices: they were careless in their howling, which signified that they did not mean him to come alive out of this, to bear witness against them. In particular he knew the torturer's voice of Sherm the Screamer.

"Come on, open up, Causland!" they were shouting, surprised at not being able to budge his door. "We're just going to ask you some questions." Causland said nothing in reply. He had no telephone in his room; and though he might shriek from a window, no one would rush to his assistance in this neighborhood, at this hour. No neighbor would venture so much involvement as to call the police, for that matter — not unless the tumult at Mrs. Bauer's house should threaten to spread to the adjacent houses.

Those smashing at his door were up to their eyes in heroin, he guessed. Somebody out there was clearheaded enough to grunt, "Get the door off the hinges!" But their superfluity of numbers hampered the assailants in that narrow corridor. Then someone screamed — oh, he knew that voice — "There's another way!" Causland heard three or four men pounding back down the stairs. Meanwhile, the savage smashing at the door continued.

Yes, there was another way: Sherm's men must have learned about Mrs. Bauer's dumbwaiter. That device was no escape route for Homer Causland, for its mechanism could not be operated from within the dumbwaiter itself; and besides, what figure would a blind man make, emerging below, helpless before his enemies? Therefore, Causland took his stand in a shadowy convenient corner, as he planned, awaiting the event.

The clanking of the dumbwaiter's chain and the growling of its motor, like Halloween sound effects, gave Causland plenty of notice of his enemy's approach. The car in the shaft halted opposite the aperture of Causland's room now; the man within knew what he was doing. It still might have been possible for Causland to press the "down" button by the dumbwaiter door, in hope of returning the car to the ground floor. But Causland preferred tactics more decisive.

"Hold it, Ralph!" the man in the car shouted to his helper below. "I'm getting out." It was the Screamer's dreadful voice.

Sherm had risen by audacity. And after all, how much resistance could be offered by a blind piano player, twice Sherm's years?

Sherm banged open the dumbwaiter door and began to scramble through the narrow opening, into the total darkness of Causland's room. He cracked his head against the oaken doorframe, trying to emerge quickly,



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and cursed. Happily for Fork, as matters turned out, Sherm was carrying a sawed-off shotgun. "Homer Causland, you old stoolie," the Screamer screamed, "get down on your knees and start begging!"

"Hi!" said Causland, softly, from the shadows. "I've got something here for you, Screamer." As Sherm swung toward him, raising the shotgun, Causland lunged. He contrived to drive the prongs of the fork straight through Sherm's lean belly. The force of Causland's rush bowled Sherm over, and Causland fell upon him. "Good-bye, Sherm," Causland panted.

Then Sherm the Screamer screamed his loudest ever. Causland heard the shotgun crash to the floor of his room. Groping about, he encountered the shaft of the fork; he tried to extract it from the belly of his enemy, whose heels were drumming on the floor. But this was an awkward undertaking, and Causland feared that meanwhile the door of his room might be taken off behind him.

So, panting, he managed in the darkness to thrust the dying Sherm, headfirst, back into the dumbwaiter. Blind Homer pressed the "down" button, sending the fatal car on its return journey, to bear back to his disciples the Screamer, perforated, with the fork still in him. Like the beasts, the Prophet Sherm could perish, after all.

Disposing of Sherm had required about one minute. Yes, the door had been lifted off its hinges now; Causland's ears informed him that his adversaries were trying to kick their way through the second barrier, the sturdy back of the enormous wardrobe.

From the bottom of the stairs, a member of the gang shouted up, desperate, *"Christ, guys, he's gutted Sherm!* Get through that door and smash him!"

Causland had the shotgun in his hands: a double-barreled repeater. His fingers checked its triggers and magazine. This gun would do very well.

Shifting his station to the foot of the iron bedstead, seven feet from the tottering wardrobe, he pointed the barrels carefully. There was mighty confusion beyond that blocked doorway, some men runing upstairs and others downstairs. Sherm's screams from below seemed less vigorous: Causland had angled his fork somewhat upward when he had made that dread thrust.

Now the carved doors of the wardrobe splintered into fragments, and a big body became entangled with the bedhead, struggling to enter the room. Causland gave this intruder one barrel.

In the little bedroom that reverberation was exquisitely painful to Causland's sensitive auditory nerves; but the result of his discharge was exquisitely gratifying. A body crashed backward. Later Causland learned that he had aimed a trifle high, so taking off the man's face.

Now Causland must carry the war into Africa. Risky strategy, that; yet not so risky as to wait for the gang to



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set the house afire. Gun at the ready, Causland clambered over some bloody bulky thing, through the demolished wardrobe. To clear the way, he fired the second barrel at a venture into the corridor beyond.

Someone else shrieked, fell, lay groaning hideously. Causland heard the whole crowd of them tumbling back down the stairs. Kneeling to thrust his weapon between the wooden balusters, the blind champion fired downward, both barrels. To judge by the anguished complaints, he had severely damaged one or two of the enemy.

Somebody fired back — a pistol, Causland judged — but missed him. Vexed, Causland gave them both barrels a second time: more screaming. It was like old times overseas.

At that moment, the horn of one car waiting at the curb began to honk furiously; then the horn of the second car. Later he was told that the drivers, on edge, had heard the siren of an ambulance on Pentecost Road, and had taken that for a patrol car.

Causland struggled back into his room. A small window looked toward Merrymont Avenue. Flinging up the sash, Causland fired into the blackness toward the honking. He heard the cars begin to pull away; again Causland fired in their direction. To his pleased surprise, there came a loud resounding bang, but not a gunshot: he must have hit a tire. A moment later a crash followed, for the car with a blown front tire, in fact, had careened across the street and struck a tree.

The other car roared away. Causland heard the running feet of the members of the gang abandoned by the driver. Then the house fell silent except for the horrid moaning of the man whom Causland had shot in the third-floor corridor.

Having made his way down to Mrs. Bauer's telephone, Causland called the police. After five or six minutes, some of the bolder spirits in the neighborhood actually ventured out of their lairs and began to converse in hushed tones, before Mrs. Bauer's house. But nobody dared ascend the steps until the police arrived.

Sergeant Shaugnessy and his men found one man dead, three dying, one shot in the legs and unable to walk, one stunned in a car that had rammed a tree, and gouts of blood on the sidewalk from one or two others who had escaped. Sherm the Screamer gave up the ghost in the ambulance bearing him to the hospital.

In Causland's phrase, "Sergeant Shaugnessy was flabbergasted but appreciative. They didn't indict me for anything."

After that he was "Fork" to boon companions and "Mr. Causland" to the less privileged. Nobody gave him trouble thereafter. He had attained the equivocal distinction of general recognition as Hawkhill's most accomplished resident. It is said in the Mustang that Fork sent a basket of poison ivy to



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Sherm's funeral; but that report I doubt. Wondrous to relate, all but two of the survivors of the attempt on Fork Causland were convicted on charges of attempted murder, criminal assault, unlicensed possession of a deadly weapon, or breaking and entering.

Fork Causland's fearsome reputation enabled him to walk the streets of Hawkhill at any hour, unmugged. There arose a popular belief that in reality he was not blind at all, but had especially keen sight behind those dark goggles. Some took him for a undercover detective. Who could have killed Sherm and his boys without even seeing them? Or conceivably — this suggestion occurring particularly among Hawkhill's West Indian element — Causland was a conjure-man, invulnerable and deadly.

Yes, he swaggered along the nocturnal streets. Yet the Screamer's band was not extinct; and those two who had survived the encounter at Mrs. Bauer's, and had not been imprisoned, would not forget. Fearsomeness wears thin with time, and the disciples of Sherm might take heart again. But Fork said no word of that.

No one could enter my church without my knowledge. I must make that point wholly clear. Were it not so, there might be some quasi-rational explanation of last night's events.

What is rare in American churches of the Romanesque revival, the Church of the Holy Ghost has a narthex, or galilee. (I prefer the latter term.) Above the broad steps frequented by the Old Soldiers of Merrymont Avenue, the great doors open upon this galilee, which traditionally is less sacred than the body of the church.

Within this interior porch, or galilee, I conduct most of my business with comers to the church — particularly with the street girls. In a vaulted chamber off the galilee I maintain a desk, some chairs, and a typewriter; this chamber has a functioning fireplace. I frequent this sentry post (so to speak) of the Holy Ghost because it is situated near the grand entrance to the church's west front. Only at this point may the whole church complex be entered nowadays.

For I have sealed the several other entrances, even that to the "service" regions of the complex, although closing the other doors has made it necessary for Lin, the Cambodian man whom I have appointed verger (janitor, in reality), to transport rubbish in a barrow to the west front. When I write "sealed," I mean bricked up. No doubt I have violated fire inspectors' rules; but the public authorities winking at worse offenses in Hawkhill, they have not troubled me concerning my precautions.

The small roundheaded windows of the church, on the northern side, are set too high for burglers to operate without ladders; also, they are narrow, with a stone pillar fixed in the middle



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of each window arch. The rector who preceded me in this benefice had a heavy wire screen attached to the outer side of every window, to protect the painted glass from boys' stones. The southern windows face upon the cloister, not upon a street, and in effect are protected by the tall rectory.

A benefaction from old Mrs. Simmons enabled me to secure the windows of the adjoining rectory with interior steel shutters. I have sealed the rectory's street doors, now reaching my rooms there by passing through the galilee and the cloister on the church's south side. Need I remark that no building is entirely secure against intruders who possess special tools for burglary? However that may be, on the nights to which I refer below, these defenses of the Holy Ghost were undisturbed, and no alarm sounded on the electronic warning system purchased out of the Simmons benefaction. I am satisfied that no one could have entered the church except through the galilee.

In one of the great bronze doors (opened only on great feast days) of the west front is set a kind of postern door, also of bronze, so narrow as to admit only one person at a time. It is this small door through which everybody and everything pass ordinarily. Only the verger and I possess keys to this door, which moreover is secured within, when I am there, by a police lock and other devices. My small vaulted reception chamber or office is situated close to this postern, so that when I am at my desk I may see who enters and leaves the church. I am as much porter as rector. Thus all of my parishioners, and other callers, must pound the enormous bronze knocker or ring the electric bell if they would see me.

The sacred vessels, the tapestries, and other furnishings of the Church of the Holy Ghost being highly valuable, efficient robbers might be attracted — were it not for the smoke grimed exterior of the building, which suggests impoverishment and dereliction. I have provided as best I might against casual thieves, and for the safety of the complex's temporary or permanent inmates. Yet all these precautions seemed futile last night.

It should be understood that during daylight hours I make the nave accessible for private devotions (not that many take advantage of the opportunity) or for the rare visitor interested in the architecture of Holy Ghost Church. I do try to make sure that either the verger or his Cambodian wife (who does our mopping and the like) is present in nave or galilee during hours when the postern door is unlocked. So it is barely conceivable that some person might have crept into the church and concealed himself until yesterday night, perhaps in the blind-story. Yet such an explanation is even more improbable than the supposition I will imply toward the close of this document.



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When Fork Causland became our church organist, I offered him a key to the church, but he refused it, saying that he could ring for the verger or myself. From the first I was confident of his honesty. In corrupted Hawkhill, he appeared to have no corrupt habits. Though fond of whiskey, Fork never was drunken. He paid little or no attention to the girls hanging about the bars where he played the piano. The pushers feared him. His conversation was always decent and sometimes amusing. Considerably to my surprise, I found that he was familiar with our liturgy, and that he prayed in church.

From asides in his talk, I gathered that he had been a wanderer, a beggar, a peddler, an acrobat, a carnival-hand, a soldier — not in that order, presumably, but at one time or another. Was his proficiency at killing derived from military experience only? Two or three times I entered the church to hear the *Dies Irae* pouring from the organ: Fork at practice in his grim humorous fashion. "Doc," he would say, descending from his bench, "it will be with this city as with the cities of the plain." He was apt at biblical quotations and curious applications of them.

Yet I cannot say that we grew intimate. My situation is lonely; I have no Hawkhill friends; I would have been glad if Fork had accepted my offer of a room in the rectory, that echoing habitation not being less homelike than his room at Mrs. Bauer's. He thanked me, but said, "I'm not a comfortable neighbor, Doc."

I do not think that he held my color against me — not that he could discern it literally. And aside from chance drinking companions, clearly he had no friends of his own. He seemed armored by a self-sufficient stoicism. I envied him that.

I inquired discreetly about Fork among my parishioners and among the denizens of Pentecost Road. Nobody seemed to know how long Causland had lived in Hawkhill. Some said, "Always, I guess"; others, "Three years, maybe"; yet others, "Never noticed him till this past winter." So far as I could ascertain, nobody ever had conversed seriously with Fork longer than I had. His oddity had tended to deter familiarities even before his bloody amazing victory at Mrs. Bauer's house. After Fork had killed Sherm and his chums, a certain deadliness seemed to hang about the piano player. (I did not sense it myself; I refer to a discernible reverent uneasiness among the habitués of the Pentecost bars). Despite Fork's isolation, somehow I fancied that of all the grotesques of Pentecost Road, he alone was permanent, the rest evanescent.

Occasionally, after he had practiced at the creaky old vast organ, Causland and I talked in a parlor of the rectory, over tea brewed by the Cambodian woman. (Both of us took rum in our tea, in that damp stone building.) Fork could converse sensibly; also somewhat mystically. He knew all



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of Hawkhill's secrets, and sometimes hinted at mysteries of the world beyond the world, as if he were Tiresias, or Homer, or some other blind seer. Now and again he deferred, during these talks, to my theological learning — or what he took for my erudition.

"Doc," he inquired at the session I best recollect, "what's possession? Being possessed by a spirit, I mean."

I endeavored to explain the church's doctrine concerning this, but that was not what he wished to know.

"I mean, Doc, how does it *feel*? Can something get inside you, and yet leave room enough for yourself? Can you be comfortable with it? Can you live with it as if it were your own brother? Can it help you?"

Naturally I was startled by this. "Are you talking about yourself, Fork?"

He nodded. "I think there's been somebody else with me for years now. Once, Doc, you said something about 'levitation' and that jumping I do — but then you beat around the bush. Well, it's not Saint Vitus's dance, Doc. Something that's got into me does the jumping — not that I object much. And when I was in real need, it lent me its sight."

I drew a long breath. "You're talking about the time Sherm came for you?"

"That's it. I know the Old Soldiers say I can really see whenever I want to. But that's a lie." He tapped his goggles. "I could take these off to show you what's underneath my eyelids, Doc; but that would give you a turn. All the same, somebody or something lent me sight that rough time."

Fork's one indulgence, not counting the free whiskies, was Brazilian cigars. He unwrapped one now, and I lit it for him.

He puffed on the black wrinkled thing. "I've told this to nobody but you, Doc. Let me tell you, it came as a blessed shock to me. I'd made my preparations blinder than any bat, and I didn't expect miracles. But when it happened, everything was coming at me so quick that I just accepted the sight, no questions asked at the moment. It didn't come upon me until the last chance. You better believe me, Doc." He blew smoke from his nostrils.

"I kept this quiet because anybody that dared would have called me a damned liar. The moment Sherm pushed open that dumbwaiter door, sight came to me.

Or maybe I shouldn't say 'sight': well, 'perception' — that's more the word. I seemed to see outlines. There was a twenty-watt bulb dangling in the dumbwaiter, and Sherm was outlined against it. That was no time for musing on miracles. I knew he couldn't make out hide nor hair of me. His outline, sort of like a paper doll, turned toward me, blindlike, when I spoke to him, and the outline of a shotgun went up to his shoulder. That cleared the way for me to dive under the gun and



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run him through the belly."

Deftly he relit his cigar.

"Mind you, Doc, I could make out only movement. So once I sent the elevator back down to the ground floor, I was blind as before. But when one of the gang broke through the wardrobe, I made out the shape of him plain, and blew the face off him. Then when I pushed into the corridor myself, I could — well, perceive, I guess — perceive the lot of Sherm's boys running downstairs, and I fired into the midst of them. And when I gave both barrels to that car outside the house, I could see the thing moving away from the curb. After that, right after that last shot, whatever lent the perception to me took it back again. Is there a name for what happened to me, Doc?"

"Not a medical term, Fork," I said to him. "There's a psychological term: extrasensory perception. Lord knows what that means."

"You half-believe me, don't you, Doc? Nobody else would. Well, what about the possession? Do you half-believe that, too?"

Now the sun had sunk beneath the level of the barred windows of my rectory; we had no light but the glow from the coals in my fireplace. I shivered. "What could it be that's got into you? May it be a devil, do you think?"

"I'm asking you, Doc. How the hell should I know?" Fork sprang up and performed a little song-and-dance routine in my parlor, chanting—

*He's a devil, he's a devil,*
*He's a devil in his own home town.*
*On the level, he's a devil . . .*

Then Fork sat down as abruptly as he had risen.

"Look out, Doc: that was it, the thing in me, just now. He hears you. But no, I don't think it's a demon. It's a killer, though, and not pretty."

The parlor door swung open; we both jumped at the sound and the draft of cold air. But it was only the verger's wife, my housekeeper, come to carry off the tea things. Evidently Fork thought that he had uttered too much already, for he clapped his derby on his large head and went out, back toward Pentecost Road.

We never had opportunity to resume that chilling conversation about the possesssed and the possessors. I suspect that Fork may have been capable of elaborate hoaxes, for the fun of them — but not on that dark subject.

How often, my gun under my jacket, have I strolled almost the length of Pentecost Road, praying as I ambled! Desperate though the neighborhood is, some franchise eating houses make a good profit there, at high nocturnal risk of their cashiers. Much of the Road is brightly lit by neon. "Twenty Gorgeous Bottomless Dancers, Stark Naked or Your Money Back," one sign blinks on and off. I pass four or



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five massage parlors.

Shoddy little theaters for X-rated films (their marquees promising more than they can deliver, in competition with the living flesh next door or down the road); "adult" bookshops for retarded adolescents and middle-aged illiterates; scantly stocked tiny "notion" shops that are fronts for narcotics-peddling — these are the thriving enterprises of Pentecost Road, in this year of our Lord. The hideousness of it hurts as much as the depravity.

Now I have to write about Julie Tilton.

There is no coincidence: everything that occurs is part of a most intricate design.

The Mustang, where the daiquiris are good (though nothing else there has any admixture of good in it), is situated at the intersection of Pentecost and Merrymont. A great deal of money changes hands, more or less surreptitiously, at those corners. For that reason the sidewalk outside the Mustang is frequented by mendicants. I usually give something to the old man with no legs, selling pencils, who rides a board to which four roller skates are fixed; he is there on the bitterest days. Another begging habitué is the idiot woman shaped like an interrogation point. Also, "religious" freaks are to be seen, especially an Indian fakir in nothing but a loincloth.

The beggars and the madmen are outnumbered by the street girls, some promenading, some lounging against the wall, awaiting custom. Few are birds of paradise. I labor under no delusion about harlots. With very rare exceptions, the kindly prostitute is a creation of novelists and playwrights. As a class, such women are psychopathic, devouring, and treacherous. They have their uses, particularly to the police: in the hope of reward, or out of unblemished malice, they betray their bullies and lovers. I have discovered among them, on Pentecost Road, no heroic repentant Magdalene. All that I can accomplish among them, pastorally, is to persuade a few of the young ones, strutting down Pentecost under compulsion, to go back to their parents or to whomever in the home town might receive them. I have facilitated a number of such escapes, after conversations at my office in the galilee. The first stage on my underground railway is a lodging for a night in that safe-house, my rectory. They do not tempt me. Ever since my ordination, I have kept myself under a most strict discipline; and even had I not vowed myself to celibacy and chastity, still I would be no fool — though sensual, more sensual than most by nature.

On Monday evening, as I approached the Mustang, the girls were particularly numerous and importunate. I shouldered my way among them — black hat, black face, black leather jacket — in my role of hard-drinking impecunious chiropractor. Just outside the door of the Mustang someone gripped me by the arm — but



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not with the customary unimaginative "Want to have some fun, honey?" This person was saying, "Brother, have you been washed in the blood of the Lamb?"

I swung round. It was a young black man, fantastically dressed, a street preacher, wild-eyed. He had a companion.

This colleague, seated in a sort of primitive wheelchair, was paler than death. He did not move a muscle, not even of lips or eyes. At first I took him for a paralytic, trundled about for a holy show by his preacher-captor. Then the thought flashed through my mind that this white boy, bareheaded, neatly dressed, might be a corpse: things not much less shocking are seen from time to time at Pentecost and Merrymont.

"Brother, have you been saved?" the mad preacher was demanding of me. "Have you been washed in the blood of the Lamb?"

I unfixed his hand from my arm. "Nobody can answer that question with full knowledge, brother," I told him.

But already he had turned from me and was addressing the passing stream of tarts, procurers, pushers, drunkards, and males of various ages "out for a little fun." "Brothers and sisters," he was crying, "where'll you spend eternity? Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging, and whoever is deceived thereby is not wise."

He then plucked the white boy out of his chair and exhibited him at arm's length to the street people. Praise be, the pallid thing was an inanimate mannequin, marvelously realistic, after all. I wouldn't have to telephone Shaugnessy.

" 'Cept you take the Lord Jesus for your personal savior, you're no better 'n this here dummy!" the wild-eyed preacher was shouting. "Where you goin' to spend eternity? You want to spend it with the Whore o' Babylon and the Beast, whose number is six-six-six? The wages of sin is death. You want to be like this here dummy, no brains in your head? You want to be cast into the fire eternal? Brothers and sisters, death is all around us. Old Mister Death, he grabs you when you're on a high, when you're drinkin' and fornicatin', and he takes the breath out o' your body, leavin' you no better than this here dummy! He takes you where the worm never dieth and the fire is not quenched. 'Cept you follow the Lord Jesus, Ol' Man Death put his bony hand on you, and you curl up like a worm. ..."

Two mighty hands took me by the shoulders, from behind. Their clutch was terribly painful; a shock like electricity ran through me. "Gottcha, Doc!" said Fork. "You come along with me into this hell on earth they call the Mustang. Wahoo!"

His ears had singled me out in the crowd by my few words in retort to the street preacher.

"In a minute, Fork, you Beast from



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the Abyss," I muttered.

With his stick tucked under his arm, the blind man stood beside me, listening to the crazy preacher. "It always was a scandal, that faith, eh, Doc?" He poked me in the ribs with the head of his stick. "That there raving and ranting fellow — sort of like a caricature of you, eh, Doc?"

"Go to hell, Fork," I told him.

"All in good time, Doc; all in God's own good time." He chuckled harshly.

" 'Cept you repent, brothers and sisters, you gonna die the body of this death," the crazy preacher was exhorting some tarts and three beggars. He brandished the mannequin. "No brains, jes' like this here dummy; no heart, no guts, no nothin'. If you don't have no immortal soul washed in the blood of the Lamb, you got nothin'. Old Mister Death, he got your 'pointed day writ down on his calendar; you poor dummies. ..."

"You've got some competition in the soul business, Doc," said Fork, half-needling me, half-serious. We were entering the Mustang. "You ever repent of taking up this line of work? Feel sorry about not marrying and taking up the cross in Hawkhill?"

"It's a calling, Mr. Homer Causland; I wouldn't have it any other way. What's your calling? Speaking of Old Man Death, killing seems to be your talent."

"In the line of duty, Doc: add that qualification. You're welcome to call me a rat, Reverend Doc. On one of those records for no-eyes, once, I heard a poem by some Scotchman about a rat's prayer:

*"God grant me that*
*I carrion find,*
*And may it stink:*
*O Father, kind,*
*Permit me drink*
*Of blood ensoured ...*
*There is no waste*
*Where rats are fed,*
*And, for all haste,*
*Grace shall be said."*

Fork had astounded me once again. "In what corner of hell did you hear that, you blind devil?"

"Devil?" Not quite that, Doc; devil's cousin, maybe. Wahoo!"

He sat down at his piano, called for his whiskey, and began to play. I took a table near him. The Mustang was two-thirds full, that night, of the lost. The blind devil played for them like an angel. Even to acid rock he imparted a somber pathos; or so it sounded to my priestly ears.

I was roused out of a reverie brought on by Fork's "not marrying" when a girl's voice, a sweet one, said, "Excuse me, sir." She withdrew a chair from my table, turned it in Fork's direction, and sat waiting for him to pause in his playing. I saw her in profile.

She was beautiful, but more than beautiful: lovely. She wore her blond hair long, very long. Nose, lips, and chin all were delicate and perfect; so



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was her figure. She was six feet tall at least. Her blue eyes were impossibly innocent. I judged her to be sixteen or seventeen years old. This was nobody off Pentecost Road. Face aside, she was dressed too decently for that.

When Fork had stopped playing, she said to him, "Excuse me, sir. Maybe you can help me. Have you seen Alexander Tilton?"

Fork turned toward her his poker face with its black goggles, taking the cigar from his mouth. He removed his derby. "Why do you ask a blind man a question like that, lady?"

I watched her blush. Her fair skin was suffused with a soft delicious pink. "Oh, I'm sorry; I didn't know. I thought you looked like a man who might have met a good many people in this part of town."

"I do, lady, but I never met anybody by that name. Doc, could you check at the bar?"

I rose. Who wouldn't do anything for this young lady? Indeed, I bowed the first bow ever executed in the Mustang.

"Meet the Reverend Raymond Montrose, rector of Holy Ghost Church, lady, even if he doesn't look it."

"I don't want to disturb you, Reverend Montrose," the beauty said. She blushed again.

"It's a pleasure, young lady," I assured her, stuttering a little. "But not 'Reverend Montrose,' if you please. Father Montrose, or Dr. Montrose, or even Mr. Montrose; but never Reverend Montrose. I'm a stickler for forms, being an Anglo-Catholic."

"Oh, I'm a Methodist, I'm afraid, Father."

"Don't be afraid, not even in this bar. Excuse me, Miss ..."

"I'm Julie Tilton, and Alexander Tilton is my brother, twelve years older. The last letter he sent us was on the stationery of the Tangiers Motel, Pentecost Road, and so I got a room there, half an hour ago, but they hadn't heard of him, and said somebody at the Mustang Bar might know him. I took a taxi straight here." She was genuine!

"You better check out of the Tangiers Motel, lady: they got something worse than the veterans' disease there. Doc, stop your bowing and scraping, and ask after one Alexander Tilton at the bar. I'll keep an eye on this Miss Tilton, in a manner of speaking." Fork resumed his derby.

The bartender and the waitresses hadn't ever heard of an Alexander Tilton, they informed me. When I returned to the piano, I found three unpleasant young toughs standing by Fork and the girl, flies drawn to honey.

"How about a dance, baby?" said the biggest of them.

"Move on, brothers," I told them. They stared at me.

"You heard Doc," Fork growled. "Scoot, boys."

They went, swearing, but softly.

"Pay them no mind, lady," said



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Fork. "They'll get their comeuppance before long, I promise you. Now this brother of yours — what did he look like?"

"My grandmother and I haven't seen him for nearly ten years, but he must be very good-looking. He's about as tall as I am, and slim. The girls back home were wild about him. He got one — but that doesn't matter now." Another blush.

"He used to write about once a year," she went on; "then, better than two years ago, he stopped writing. I thought everybody around here must know him, because he did so well in this city. He sent lots and lots of money home for us to keep for him. 'Bury it in the cellar in tight cans,' he wrote to us. Some people don't trust banks, I guess, and he's one of them. He even sends the cash in little sealed boxes, by special messangers! Except for letting us know his money was on its way, Sherm never told us much in his letters."

"*Sherm?*" said Fork, drawling out the name.

"Here in Hawkhill, Miss Tilton," I put in, "A good many people get lost — and not found. I thought you said your brother's name was Alexander."

"Oh, it is, Father Montrose: Alexander Sherman Tilton. But we've called him Sherm in the family ever since I can remember."

Fork, silent, relit his cigar.

"Possibly there are other ways you might identify your brother, Miss Tilton," I continued. "His voice, for instance: was it soft as yours?"

She smiled angelically. "Oh, no. Sherm always spoke very loudly — loud enough to hurt some people's ears. When he was angry, could he ever yell!"

"Ummm," from Fork. "Now this brother Sherm, lady: did he ever use any other names?"

"Not that I know of. Why should he? But perhaps he used the 'Alexander' in this town, because he always signed his letters to us that way, as if he had gotten more formal. It was just 'Alexander,' not signing his last name. We mailed back letters to Alexander Tilton, at the post office box number he gave us; but he never answered until he decided to send more money home."

I presented to her my engraved card, in the hope of achieving in Miss Tilton's admirable eyes a respectability that my beard and my fancy boots would not convey to her. Or might she, untraveled, fancy that all doctors of divinity went about so attired? "Did you have some particular reason," I inquired, "for coming all this distance to look for your brother?"

"No, Father: it's just that he's my only brother, and I haven't any sisters, and Dad and Mom died five years ago. In his last letter, Sherm told me that I ought to come to the big city and live with him; that I'd really go places here. He practically ordered me to come. I wrote back that I would, whenever he



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wanted me to. He didn't answer me, though, so I waited until after graduation, and at last I decided that the thing for me to do was simply to come here and look him up. Here I am!"

Yes, here she was, Iphigenia in Aulis, come unwittingly to the sacrifice. Here she was, a brand for me to snatch pastorally before she had been singed!

"This gentleman at the piano is our church organist, Mr. Fork Causland," I informed her. I gave Fork a gentle, stealthy dig in his ribs. "He and I will do what we can to help you."

"Sure, lady," Fork said. "I wouldn't go asking around this here bar, if I were you."

The three unpleasant young men had not scooted very far: I noticed them standing at the bar, scowling at us. I recollected, or thought I recollected, that two of them had been surreptitiously pointed out to me, months ago, as survivors of the Screamer's gang. It wouldn't do to linger. I put my hand on Fork's shoulder.

"The two of us had best take Miss Tilton back in a taxi to the Tangiers Motel, Fork, and get her bags now. I can put her up at the rectory, if she doesn't mind."

"Right, Doc — I guess. There's too many vermin at the Tangiers, lady. Just one more question, before we go." Fork swallowed the remnant of his whiskey. "Brother Sherm — in his last letter, better than two years ago, did he give you any idea of what he was going to have you do in this town?"

"I'm quite a good typist, Mr. Fork, but Sherm didn't mention that. All he suggested was that he knew a lot of interesting boys to take me out." Here she colored more furiously than before.

We made out way to the door, I running interference. All the men in the Mustang were staring, and three or four whistled loudly. "Where you takin' that kid, Fork?" somebody called out. Someone else muttered, "For Christ's sake, don't rile him."

A taxi was at the curb, letting out a drunken fare. Julie Tilton got in with us two strangers, ingenuously. Possibly my "cute British accent" was reassurance of sorts. With no other two men from the Mustang would she have been able to check out of the Tangiers uninsulted — or worse than that. Coincidence again? I think not.

"I fancy you come from a rather small town, Miss Tilton," I said on our way to the motel.

"How did you know, Father? Titus isn't much more than a church, a general store, and a dozen houses. Sherm used to call it Hicksville or Endsville."

"How you gonna keep 'em down on the farm, after they've seen Hawkhill?" Fork had been humming. He ceased, saying, "Julie, pardon my asking, but was this brother Sherm in more sorts of trouble than one, when he left Titus nearly ten years ago?"

"He got himself into a peck of troubles, Mr. Fork. But he must have



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straightened himself up, or he couldn't have earned all that money to send home."

At the flashy Tangiers, I though it prudent to go with Julie to her room for her suitcase. I was pleased and somewhat surprised to find the bag still there; they had not given her a key for her room. While Julie and I were down the hall, the desk clerk tried to make trouble about this guest being taken away by two men, but Fork gave him the rough side of his tongue. Undoubtedly the desk clerk had plans for the lady guest. He asked her to come back any time; he meant it.

"How you goin' to keep 'em away from Pentecost, jazzin' around, paintin' the town?" Fork was humming as we drew up before the Church of the Holy Ghost.

The lovely big girl was overwhelmed by the scale of my church. "This must be a very religious town, Father Montrose! I hope I'm not causing your wife too much trouble."

"Once upon a time, it was. I'm celibate, Miss Tilton. Our housekeeper, the verger's wife, will get your room in order and bring you tea — and a sandwich, if you'd care for one." Providentially, no fugitive street girl was lodged in the rectory that night. I unlocked the postern door, and we three entered.

The galilee of my church had taken the galilee of Durham Cathedral for its model, in part. The rows of pillars, and the roundheaded arches with their chevron moldings, took Julie's breath away. From my office I rang a bell connected with the verger's rooms at the top of the rectory, summoning the little Cambodian woman, whose English was tolerable.

We had our ingenue safe out of the Mustang, safe out of the Tangiers Motel. What next?

"Will it be all right for me to stay here until I find my brother?" Julie asked, as the verger's wife waited to lead her across the cloister. "I don't know how to repay you, Father. I'm sure Sherm's somewhere very close; I just simply feel it."

We could have ridden on to Mrs. Simmons's, Doc. She'd have taken the girl in if you'd asked her. It wouldn't have been like imposing a streetwalker on the old lady."

"She's safer in the rectory, Fork."

We two sat in my office off the galilee. It was midnight, and Miss Tilton doubtless was sleeping the sleep of the guiltless — a few rods distant from me.

"Maybe," said Fork. "Probably they're looking for her right now."

"Who in particular?"

"Those three that wanted to dance with her at the Mustang. The guy that spoke to her and gave us some lip — I knew his voice. He was one of the two acquitted after my fracas at Mrs. Bauer's. His name's Franchetti. He's getting his nerve back, two years after the treatment I gave his pals. Sherm's



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sister would be worth plenty to him."

"Is she actually Sherm's sister?"

"Why not? It all fits together. I bet Franchetti saw they were two peas in a pod. Sherm must have told him she'd be along. What does the girl look like?"

"A rose in bloom." I had not been able to keep my eyes off young Miss Tilton; I supplied particulars, perhaps too enthusiastically.

"That's enough detail, Doc. Sherm was a good-looking goon, except for the smirk, they tell me. He was her height, her coloring, and 'Sherman Stanton' is close enough to 'Sherman Tilton.' "

"But her coming straight to the man who executed her brother? That's too much of a coincidence, Fork."

"There's wheels within wheels, Doc. She was sent, God knows why. It did give me a jolt when she said 'Sherm,' let me tell you."

We fell silent for a minute or two.

"We can't let Julie know what her brother was, nor how he ended," I said then.

Fork nodded. "She's got to go back to Titus, pronto."

"It won't be simple to persuade her of that, at least for a few days. She says her intuition tells her that Sherm's near at hand. Girls and their notions!"

"She may not be so far wrong, Doc. That's been my intuition, too."

"Don't be a fool, Fork."

"I never would have lasted this long if I'd been a fool, not with the life I've led. Now look: in this here Middle Ages church of yours, you've talked to me more than once about death and judgment. You're a Middle Ages parson, Doc, and I'm with you. What's the teaching about what you've called 'the interval'?"

He had cornered me with my own doctrine. "I know what you're thinking, Fork. Once upon a time, everybody believed it. When a man dies, that's not the end of his personality — not until the Last Judgment. There may be a kind of half-life, though the body has perished. After all, in the twentieth century we know what we call 'matter' is a collection of a power we don't understand. That arrangement falls apart when a body disintegrates; but the particles, the energy ... ah, there's the rub, Fork. Even a consciousness may survive, Fork, in a twilight realm of which we receive glimpses, sometimes, that startle us, the living. Until the Last Judgment, what we call ghost ..."

"All right, Doc: that's your teaching. you believe it?"

"Yes."

"And you believe in possession?"

"Yes."

"Sherm was possessed, Doc, if ever a man was. Maybe I am, though not in the same way. Something might possess you. Watch your step."

"What do you mean?"

"You ought to know, Doc."

I shrugged that off. Another interval of silence followed. Then I said, "Why did Sherm tell Julie to come to Hawkhill?"



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"Unnatural affection, Doc. After he'd taken his pleasure with her, he'd have peddled her on Pentecost Road."

I crossed myself. "Lord! And this girl!"

"Sherm drove out any goodness that had been in him, leaving himself empty. A demon entered in. You better believe me, Doc."

I let my friend out of the church then, and he went his way into the darkness intrepidly; standing at the postern, I heard his stick striking the sidewalk occasionally as he made his way toward that desiccated room at Mrs. Bauer's.

Having secured the door, I passed through nave and choir to the apse. Tall archaic carvings of saints loomed above me. For half an hour I knelt in prayer. "Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death." I prayed even for Sherm, unlikely creature. As I passed back through the nave, my eye somehow was drawn upward to the blindstory along the north wall. But if there had been any slight movement, it must have been a rat's: the vermin plagued us; I had extirpated them from the rectory, but they continued, a few of them, to haunt the church itself.

In my rectory, I paused at Julie's door. The keys to the rectory's interior doors had been lost years ago. Should I knock? Should I simply look in upon her, silently, to make sure she was all right — and for a moment's glimpse of that perfect face in sleep? But restraining myself, I went on to my own whitewashed room (ascetic as any monk's cell), three doors farther on.

The rectory was so well built, and fitted with such heavy doors and draperies, that the Cambodians on the top floor could hear nothing of noise on this ground floor, I reflected.

On Tuesday morning the housekeeper served a decent breakfast to Julie and me in the dining room, so seldom used, musty and sepulchral. I found the young lady surprisingly perceptive; and she could converse animatedly. She was interested in my Church of the Holy Ghost; I, in her charms. Her face helped me somewhat to drive out gross images from my thoughts: its purity was foreign to Hawkhill. The delicate flair of the tall beauty's nostrils! I thought of her dead brother, so like, so different.

She insisted upon combing the city for her brother. It would have been perilous to have taken her walking on the streets of Hawkhill, especially if the remnants of her brother's gang were looking for her. Having persuaded her to visit officialdom instead, I called a taxi and took the darling on a tour of police headquarters, city hall, the central post office, the county coroner's office. Nobody had heard of a youngish man called Alexander Tilton. Of course I did not inquire after a person called Sherman Stanton. Only four Tiltons were listed in the telephone directory, and from downtown we



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rang up all of those, unavailing.

Sergeant Shaugnessy, Vice and Homicide Squad gave us half an hour of his time. That visit was risky; but though Shaugnessy stared at Julie fixedly, apparently he could not place the resemblence between this lovely innocent and the worst man in Hawkhill. He told us that if we would come back another day, he would try to go through his "morgue" of photographs with us. I did not mention that I intended to ship the girl back to Titus before that might occur. Happily Julie did not mention to the Sergeant that her brother's middle name was Sherman — though it is unlikely that he would have been quick-witted enough to make that improbable connection. Also, she said nothing about the money he sent home.

I took her to dinner at a cafeteria downtown, and then we returned to the rectory. Fork stopped by a few minutes after we had got back; we reported to him our failure.

"For all you know, Julie," said Fork, "your brother may have moved on east, or west. There's an Amtrak train tomorrow noon that could take you within ten miles of Titus; I stopped by the station. Oh, you know about that? Take it, girl, take it."

It entered my mind that I did not wish to let her go so soon. She was protesting to Fork that she was ready to stay here a week, if there were any chance of finding Brother Sherm.

"There'll be other trains, Fork," I said. "Or she could fly back, about the end of this week."

"And you'll comfort Julie spiritually until then?" Fork inquired, in his most sardonic way. But the girl appeared to catch no imputation. I could have struck Fork.

"Father Montrose already has given me such good advice!" she told the old blind devil. "He's taken me to see everybody who might know something about Sherm. I don't know what I can ever do to make it up to him for all his trouble."

I almost said at that point, "I do know."

"If you're going to hang on here, Julie," Fork was telling her, "don't go outdoors by yourself. Any girl's in danger on these streets, even in daylight — and you in particular, sweet girl graduate of Titus Rural High."

"Why especially?" Her eyes widened.

Fork ignored that question. "And if anything should happen to the reverend ecclesiastic here, call a taxi and go to Mrs. Simmons's house. Doc will write down the address for you."

She was startled and concerned. "Why, whatever could happen to Father Montrose?"

"Some of the boys at the Mustang Bar have it in for him now, and I'm told they've learned where he lives. That's one thing possible; there are other possibilities. Doc, take out your notepad and give her Mrs. Simmons's address right now."



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I did that.

Julie was puzzled and shaken. "Ah, well," I told her, "that's merely for emergencies, which don't happen. But I'll telephone Mrs. Simmons to tell her about you."

"I'll be off," Fork said, "and back tomorrow evening." Wednesday was his night for prolonged practice on the organ. "Keep her indoors, Doc. Tell her about Ol' Mister Death putting his bony hands on you here in Hawkhill. And Doc, exert your will, as you're given to saying in your sermons: don't let anything occupy you."

He sauntered away down Merrymont — tapping past its boarded-up storefronts, its derelict gasoline stations, its fire-gutted mansions, its wastelands of unprofitable parking lots — a deadly, kind man. At the moment I hated him: he surmised too much. Now I most bitterly repent that malign emotion.

It being nearly time for evensong, I must put on my vestments. I conscientiously perform my daily offices, although no one attends my services except on Sundays. Somehow I did not wish to have Julie at my vespers: I suppose now that I sensed, given my growing desire for her, how Julie for a congregation might have made evensong a mockery.

"What shall we do with you while I'm in the church, Julie?" (The phrase itself sounded erotic to me.) "Possibly you need to write a letter home? Do you play dominoes? Perhaps we'll have a match when I come back."

Or perhaps we'll have a match of something else, I added for my own delection, silently. I had begun to lose control of my fancies about this Miss Julie Tilton, kid sister of the pillar of unrighteousness. Othello, Desdemona, and the beast with two backs were only the beginning.

That she was so innocent, and I under a vow, made these prospects yet more attractive. Abelard and Heloise! Or, from *Notre Dame*, the lascivious archdeacon and virginal Esmeralda. I would laugh, toying with her in the beginning, tugging at her long hair...

Fork, the homicidal old devil, damn him, must have sensed my change of mood — my change of character, almost. What had he meant by his "don't let anything occupy you"? But Fork would not return until tomorrow evening. Meanwhile, Julie and I could have a very lively time. Perhaps. There were risks. ...

While sinking into these amorous reveries, I had put on my vestments. I was about to enter the church, to celebrate evensong at the apsidal chapel of Saint Thomas of Canterbury, when the electric bell rang at the great doors. The Cambodian couple were out for the evening, at the cinema — a thoughtful suggestion of mine, that. Damn the bell: let it ring! But then, Julie might hear it and foolishly open the postern; Lord knows who might enter. No, I had best respond myself.

I endeavored, while passing



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through the galilee to put Julie out of my mind. Her body had become an obsession, all six feet of her young inexperience. My amorous images were turning toward violent acts, in my mind's eye. It was as if the appetites of someone else ...

Releasing the several locks, I swung open the postern door. A big man stood there. By the light of the small bulb that burns above the door, I made out his face. It was Franchetti, once Sherm's chief enforcer, the man who had accosted Julie in the Mustang the previous night.

Though not so massive as I am, Franchetti was tall and tough: that pleased me. Rather than slamming the door in his face, I said to him, "Good evening, Mr. Franchetti. You've come to evensong?"

He seemed taken aback at my knowing his name, and he did not understand my invitation. Also, he may have been confused as to my identity: as I mentioned earlier, I look different in cassock and surplice.

"Hi, Doc — I mean, Rev," he began. "You're the chief honcho here, right? I got a deal to make with you."

"Do come in, Franchetti." I stood back to admit him.

The spectacle of the dimly lit galilee obviously bewildered my visitor. To him this splendid Romanesque porch, with its shadows and mysterious columns and many arches, must have seemed like the setting for a horror movie — not that any mere film could be more horrid than Franchetti's own mode of existence. Locking automatically, the door closed behind him.

"You've come to divine worship, Franchetti?"

He snorted. "Some joker! Rev, we could do you a lot of damage."

"I'm aware of that, Brother Franchetti. You might even murder me — or try to. It could turn out like your attempt on Causland."

He stared at me; decided on a new tack. "O.K., Rev, let's drop that line. I came here to give you money, real money."

"How much?"

"A thousand bucks, right now, Rev."

"For the succor of the poor?"

He snorted again. "If that's the way you like to kid, Rev."

"Possibly you expect something in exchange?"

"We sure do. You're goin' to give us that young blonde you been amusin' yourself with. You got no claim on her."

"You have?"

"Sure. Sherm promised her to the boys two years ago, and he took it in the guts, but now we're goin' to collect her."

"You take her to be Sherm's sister?"

"Sure, Rev. Sherm was goin' to have his kinky fun with her, and then turn her over to us to be eddicated for the street, understand? You didn't never meet Sherm? Well, her and Sherm coulda been identical twins, see,



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cept for differences in the right places. She's our stuff. You already had your pleasure, Rev, with what she's got."

I sucked in my breath: he had shot near the mark. My adrenalin could not be restrained much longer. Yet I contrived to prolong our conversation for a few moments.

"What makes you say that, dear Brother Franchetti?"

"Hell, Rev, we found out you took in four or five kids, two of 'em our property, for your private use in this here crazyhouse of yours. None of 'em ever showed up on Pentecost again. What'd you do with 'em, Rev? Got 'em chained in the cellar? Buried in the cellar? I hate to think of what you done with them girls, Rev — and one of 'em a gold mine. Why, you're a public menace. Somebody ought to turn you in to the pigs."

At this point in our dialogue I burst into laughter, hearty if hysterical. The sound echoed through the crepuscular galilee. Franchetti joined somewhat uneasily in the dismal mirth.

If we poor feeble sinners — of whom I am the chief — are engaged in a holy war against the forces of Satan, we ought to ensure that not all the casualties fall on our side.

"Franchetti," I said, "I have been unfair to you. Before you entered this place, I ought to have informed you that from the age of four upward, I was trained in the manly and martial arts by my sergeant-father, at Spanishtown. The door is locked. Do you think you can contrive to get out of this place alive?"

Being an old hand at such encounters, Franchetti reached very swiftly for what he carried within his jacket. Yet I, strung up for this contest, was swifter. I gave him a left in the belly, a right to the jaw, took him by the throat and pounded his head against the sandstone wall. He collapsed without being able to draw, and I disarmed him. He slumped down to the flags.

"You mistook me for a Creeping Jesus, perhaps," I remarked. I dragged him up and knocked him down again. Then I proceeded to kick and trample my victim, with truly hellish fury.

I have been in many fights, principally before I was ordained, but never before had I treated a fallen adversary in that fashion. What was it Fork had said? "Watch out — something might get inside you, Doc?" I didn't care now.

Having unlocked the door, I took the broken man by his ankles and dragged him outside, face down. I pulled him some distance, round the corner to the lane that runs alongside the north wall of the church. A large trash bin is chained there. In the chill rain, no witnesses passed. Having administered several more kicks to Franchetti, I heaved him into the bin, head down. The garbage truck would find him in the morning, if no one noticed the wreck before then. One more of the mugged would rouse no great sensation in Hawkhill. What Franchetti had



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done to others, now had been done to him.

On my way back to the postern, I noticed that Franchetti's billfold had fallen on the sidewalk. In it I found nearly two thousand dollars in hundred-dollar bills. The wallet and Franchetti's gun I flung down the opening of a convenient storm sewer. The bills I stuffed into our poor box within the galilee, so laying up treasure in heaven for Franchetti.

I felt like Hercules or Thomas à Becket. Should I swagger down to Pentecost Road, seeking out Franchetti's two particular chums, to give them a dose of the same medicine? But I was weary: it was as if abruptly the destructive energy were being drained out of me. Instead, I went back into the church, forgetting evensong for the first time, and strode through the cloister to my rectory.

*Libido dominandi*, for the time being, had driven out a different lust. Besides, exhaustion and disgust had begun to set in. I passed Julie's door, reeled into my own room, and slept in my vestments.

Before breakfast, Sergeant Shaugnessy telephoned me to report that a man named Franchetti, who had a long criminal record, had been found badly damaged near my church, and now lay in critical condition in Receiving Hospital. He wondered if I had heard anything outside in the street, during the night. I informed him that no sounds penetrated through our great bronze doors. This seemed to satisfy the Sergeant, not solicitous for Franchetti's well-being. "Franchetti's got the d.t.'s," he informed me. "He keeps groaning that a nigger preacher who breaks bones took his money and beat his brains out."

I contrived to be urbane with Julie at breakfast. My ambition to conquer somehow was diminished in the morning; I felt affection more than appetite. We spent the day visiting, by taxi, the city office of the FBI, the state police headquarters, and the hospitals: no discoveries about any Tilton.

But as evening approached, images of concupiscence rose strong again in my head. I arranged for the verger and his wife, to their surprise, a second expedition to the flicks, in a suburb. They protested that the taxis would cost too much; I brushed that aside, handing them forty dollars. I would have Julie at my undisturbed disposal for at least three hours. Miss Tilton would be worth two twenties.

Yet there was Fork to be reckoned with: I had almost forgotten that he would arrive about nine or nine-thirty to practice on the organ. Well, he had no key to the church: let him ring in vain for admittance. I would not be diverted from what Julie had to offer.

I took the trouble to book a taxi, for precisely eight-thirty, to come to the church door and take the Cambodian couple to the suburban movie



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house. I would take Julie into the church itself, the moment they left: a piquant setting for what I intended. Tuesday night I had enjoyed battering Franchetti in the galilee; this night I would have the relish of sacrilege with Julie in the sanctuary.

I knew what I was doing and just how I would go about everything, rejoicing in outrage. Yet something else in me still protested against this wildness.

About seven o'clock, I went into the church, took some kneeler-cushions from pews, and laid them conveniently before the little altar in the apse-chapel of Thomas of Canterbury. Here I meant to celebrate my peculiar evensong with Julie Tilton.

An interesting architectural feature of my Church of the Holy Ghost is a large entrance, at the crossing, to the crypt. The stair downward, and the balustrades that guard it, are of splendid marble. I am told that this construction closely resembles the approach to the tombs at a church in Padua, which I have not visited.

As I returned from the apse toward the nave, I thought for a moment that I heard a voice down the sepulchral stair. Could it be the verger? My impression of a voice was so strong that I descended into the large low-vaulted crypt. I found everything in order, and no man or woman. My conflict of emotions must be affecting my perceptions. Julie would have to pay for that, in precisely an hour and a half.

The two of us ate a simple dinner in the rectory; I told the Cambodian housekeeper not to bother with the dishes until she came back from the cinema. Julie must have thought my manner odd: I talked confusedly of everything under the sun and the moon — theology, Jamaica, low life in Hawkhill, the bishop, Fork (but there I checked my tongue), Mrs. Simmons, the lonely existence of a celibate. I stared hard at her all the while. Though presumably a little disturbed by my eccentricity, Julie remained pleasant, now and again asking a sensible question, and occasionally a naive one. I must have her.

"I don't suppose you've ever been present at a liturgy of the sort we celebrate in this church, Julie."

"Oh, no, Father Montrose, I haven't; but I'd just love to."

"It happens that I have arranged a special evensong liturgy for you alone, Julie. You'll be my whole congregation, a few minutes from now, at our Chapel of Saint Thomas of Canterbury."

Her assent was delicious. What was to follow might be rather rough on Miss Tilton, but delicious for me. Let the consequences be damned.

I took my prize by the hand and led her to the galilee. My grasp did not startle her; quite possibly she thought it part of the liturgy.

It was nearly half-past eight. The old Cambodian verger was unlocking the postern door.



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"Taxi honk, Father," he told me. "My wife, she come down in minute."

I had held open the carved wooden doors to the nave, but Julie hung back. "Just a minute, Father: I'll say 'Have a good time' to the housekeeper when she comes down."

Gripping her slender hand so that she winced a trifle, I tugged Julie through the entrance to the nave. "Come on, kid," I heard myself saying harshly, "we've got no time to waste."

"Oh!" she cried.

"What's wrong, Julie, you little fool?"

"It's funny: you sounded just like Sherm then. It could have been his own voice, Father Montrose."

We two stood at the foot of the central aisle. The Norman pillars of the nave interrupted the beams of dim religious light from such concealed fixtures as I had chosen to switch on. Far ahead of us, a huge ornate sanctuary lamp shone upon the high altar; and smaller sanctuary lamps glimmered from the side chapels.

I squeezed her hand. "This is going to be a totally new experience for you, Julie. Perhaps you'll not enjoy all of it so much as I intend to."

"Father, I just know it's going to be marvelous!"

I had begun to lead her down that broad aisle.

Then for a second time I heard a harsh, incoherent voice from the crypt stair near the crossing.

I stopped dead. Julie almost tripped.

"What's wrong, Father?"

"I don't know. ... What can have spoken?"

"Spoken, Father? I didn't hear anyone at all."

Then came the first scream, so terrible that I reeled against a bench end. Ah, the ghastly echoes of it in the nave, in the aisles, in the choir, back from the blindstory!

"Oh, Father, are you all right? What's happening?"

"My God, Julie, didn't you hear that howl?" I could do no more than whisper the inquiry to her.

"I don't know what you mean. For just the littlest fraction of a second, though, I thought I heard my brother whispering in my ear."

At that moment, in this dim sanctuary light, a head emerged above the balustrade of the crypt stair. Other heads followed it. They seemed like jelly, glistening.

In the horror of that moment, I broke free from the spirit that had entered into me. I knew all of a sudden that I had been occupied and made an agent. Whether from shock or from grace, I was enabled to regain my will. Through me, these things from below had schemed to take Julie.

Swinging round, I snatched up Julie and ran with her, bursting through the doors into the galilee. The verger and his wife were going out the door to



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take the taxi. Upon them I thrust my Julie.

"Drive her to Mrs. Simmons's quick!" I ordered them. It seemed to me as if I were grunting like a hog. "Quick!" And to Julie, "Good-bye, my darling. Don't ever come back here!"

Before I slammed the door behind them, I had one last glimpse of her astounded, pallid, lovely face, forbidden to me ever after.

Then I ran back into the nave, to impede the damned invaders.

Having emerged from the stair, the things were wavering slowly up the aisle toward me. In their insubstantiality they seemed to shimmer. There came four of them, inexpressibly loathsome. I knew they must be the men who had died on Causland's fork or by his gun.

As they drew nearer, I could make out the face of the first only. Lips and nostrils were hideously contorted; yet the resemblence to Julie could not be denied. From the four wounds, gouts of blood had run down the thing's middle.

In my extremity, I tried to stammer out the Third Collect;

*Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord, and by thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night, for the love of thy only Son, our Savior Jesus Christ.*

Yet the words, inaudible, stuck in my craw. Then came the Screamer's second tremendous howl, surely from the Pit. This thing had told his disciples that his essence could transcend space and time.

I clutched a pillar. These "beasts with the souls of damned men" would overcome me, for too much of them had entered into me already. We were sib.

That second screech was followed by an unbearable silence. The Shermthing's tormented face drew nearer mine. He would enter. We would be one.

In that silence rang out the sound of brass upon stone. Fork thrust himself between me and the Screamer. "Wahoo!"

It seemed to my eyes that Fork leaped twenty feet into the air; lingered suspended there; then returned, laughing as a hyena laughs.

The four dead things shrank from him. They seemed gelatinous, deliquescent: no word might express the ghastliness of them.

But Fork was all compact, glowing with energy, transfigured and yet in semblance himself, that hard, taut face invincible.

"So must you ever be," said Fork, pointing at the four with his blindman's stick. "This place and this man are too much for you. Into the fire, Sherm and all!"

They receded. Screaming, they were swept into nothingness. I fell.

If it was consciousness I regained,



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that was an awareness of the world beyond the world. Incapable of speech or movement, I seemed to be lying in some shadowy, cold, enclosed, unknown place. Was it a sepulcher? The form of Fork Causland — derby, stick, cigar, and all — seemed to stand before me.

"In the hour of need, you were a man, Doc," he said to me, "a man in the mold of your friend Thomas à Becket. It was the old Adam in you that admitted those four spirits from below, but the better part in you withstood them. I take off my hat to you" — and so he did, sweepingly, in Fork's sardonic way.

"You'll not see the girl again, Doc, here below, nor Fork Causland. His time came; it would have come more terribly two years ago, had I not occupied him then and thereafter. The end arrived in a moment of grace, while he was on his way to reinforce you; and it will be well with poor Fork."

Though I strove to speak, I failed; the semblance of Fork shook its head. "Listen. That you should see me without your blood freezing, I have come to you in the mask of your friend Fork. I shall come to you once more, Thomas Montrose — no, priest, I'll not specify the year, the day, the hour, humankind not being able to stand much reality — and then as a friend, civilly inviting you to enter upon eternity. Why, I'll stand then hat in hand before you, Doc, as I stand now. Shall I come in the semblence of Fork Causland on that occasion, too? I would please you."

Lying rigid with fright, I could not reply to this being. He smiled Fork's stoical, humorous smile.

"Do you take me for a demon, Doc? No, I'm not what possessed Sherm, or what came close to possessing you. Through Fork's lips I told you that I was only cousin to devils. I'm a messenger, penetrating Time, taking such shapes as I am commanded: sometimes merciful, sometimes retributory.

"The old Greeks called me Thanatos. The Muslims call me Azrael. You may as well call me — why, Fork will do as well as any other name. Fast and pray, Doc. You have been tried, but not found wanting. In the fullness of time, as our blind friend Fork would have put it, 'I'll be seeing you.' "

Then he was gone, taking everything with him.

The ringing telephone on my bedside table woke me. Somehow the returned Cambodian church mice, taking me to be drunken merely, had contrived to drag me to my bed.

"Reverend Montrose?" the efficient voice of a woman inquired from the receiver. "Do you know somebody named Homer Causland? We found your name and number in one of his pockets."

"Yes. Something happened?"



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"Mr. Causland was struck by a hit-and-run driver shortly after eight-thirty last night. His body was taken to Receiving Hospital, but there wasn't anything we could do for him here. He didn't suffer. The police have got the driver and booked him for murder. Can you make the arrangements — that is, was Mr. Causland a friend of yours?"

"My only one," I told her. "*Requiescat in pace.*"

I have sent Julie Tilton's bag by taxi to Mrs. Simmons's big house, and Mrs. Simmons will see that Julie flies home, however bewildered, this evening.

If an energumen from below may penetrate even to the fastness of the church, how shall we prevail? Yet I fast and pray as one should who has been in the company of the dead damned, and has heard the speech of the Death Angel.

In all of us sinners the flesh is weak; and the future, unknowable, has its many contrived corridors and issues. Lord, I am a miserable thing, and I am afraid.

Puffed up with pride of spirit, by which fault fell the angels, I came near to serving the Prince of the Air. From the ravenous powers of darkness, O Lord, let me be preserved; and I entreat thee, do cast the lurking unclean spirits, instead, into the swine of Gadara.

For hours I have sat here, meditating, now and again scribbling these pages at my table in the galilee. The coals having expired in the grate, I am cold now.

The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong.

Winter coming on, this is a night of sleet. What is tapping now, so faintly, at the great knocker on the bronze door? It never can be she. Has the order of release been sent? "Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong." I'll unbar the little door. Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.

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*Max Kearny, occult detective, is confronted with the odd case of a TV network programming executive who can predict hit shows with the help of a bit of black magic...*

# Hello From Hollywood

BY

**RON GOULART**

She'd never actually smelled brimstone before, yet she was nearly certain that was the odor that came swirling out of the open doorway of the midnight house at her. Shivering, wrinkling her faintly freckled nose, Penny Merriman stood, hesitant on the shadowy threshold and did not immediately enter. Her keys tinkled faintly in her right hand.

"He's at it again, huh, babe?"

"Oh, hush up, Guapo. Go home. Shoo."

Guapo Garcia slipped a muscular arm around her slim shoulders and peered into the dim hall. A thin strip of light showed under the shut door of the den. "Yep, listen to him incanting in there."

"Head for home, Guapo," she urged in an anxious whisper while giving him a homeward nudge in the ribs.

"Face it, Pen, your husband's into Devil worship." Guapo gave several positive nods of his handsome head. "Happens all the time in this goofy town. My first agent actually signed a pact with—"

"That's plenty enough garbage for tonight. You just scoot along—"

"And you should've seen the contract the Devil drew up. Terrific. If I could ever get WBS to go for something like that on—"

"Guapo, you know how fond I am of you," whispered Penny, glancing again at the closed door of her husband's den. "But let me explain to you the ground rules for affairs. A most important one is that you and Luke don't meet. Especially don't meet in our home. You I see elsewhere." She elbowed him once more. "Now go."

"What kind of guy would let you walk into a spooky setup like this unescorted or..."



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"Guapo, this is Beverly Hills, not the Louisiana bayous or the English moors," Penny said. "On top of which, Luke is doing nothing more than reading scripts. He is, after all, junior program supervisor for the entire World Broadcasting Syst—"

"Who burns incense to read scripts by? Who lights thick black wax candles? Who mutters arcane chants and spells, huh? And who deals with a guy who reeks of fire and brimstone while reading a script?" Guapo grinned ironically. "Do you see me do any of that when I go over the lousy scripts our *Motorcycle Detectives* writers come up with for—"

"I'll meet you for lunch tomorrow. Same place. 'Night."

The dark, handsome actor cupped a hand to his ear. "Just listen to him going on in there, Pen. If he's not up to his toke in satanic—"

"Begone. Good night. I had a grand time."

Guapo didn't budge. He was listening to the voice coming out of the closed den.

"... warning you, you biddy, I ..."

"... Hello from Hollywood," said a second voice, a piping falsetto. "Here's an open letter to Bozo Nulty, gorgeous hunk who cohosts *Odd, Isn't It?* Dear Bozo, you and I have been friends for lo, these—"

"You don't even know Bozo. Now quit all this crap and attend—"

"My next exclusive. It's true, and you heard it here first, Mr. and Mrs. Movie Fan. Tammi Trump and Rosco Boop — he's the handsome devil who does such a divine job on the droll sitcom *I Married a Bum* — will be middle-aisling it any—"

"Damn, if you have to babble this tripe, can't you update your style some? Nobody middle-aisles it anymore. Besides which, Tammi's been living with that nurf for two years and she's four months pregnant, so it isn't exact—"

"... a bouquet of red, red roses to veteran cinemactress Joanna Wildman, set to grace the tube in everybody's fave nighttime soaper *Heavy Breathing*—"

"Cease! Knock it off. Pay attention to the matters at hand or—"

"I'll be going in now." Penny took a slow, deep breath and entered her house.

Guapo's mouth hung partly open. "There's something more than Satanism going on here, babe."

"Tomorrow. One. Chez Bimbo." She shut the door on him before he could lunge.

"*Adios, mia cara,*" Guapo murmured into the keyhole.

Penny didn't look out the spyhole in her door, but she knew the actor'd be sprinting gracefully up across their moonlit lawn to the place where he'd parked his newest Jaguar.

"I always thought adultery would be somewhat more fun," she said, forcing herself to walk up to the door of Luke's study.



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"... add another infant item. Guess who's expecting a drop-in from Brother Stork? Yes, none other than—"

"The blinking fall season starts in less than two weeks. Will you, please, look at this list of WBS shows and tell me—"

Penny knocked on the door.

Both voices died.

A full minute of silence followed.

Penny knocked again.

"Hum?" came her husband's voice.

"It's me. I'm back."

"Oh, good. How was the screening?"

"Dull and slightly demeaning. But what would you expect from a movie entitled *Here's an Icepick in Your Eye?* The 3-D effects were nice."

"Who'd you end up going with?"

"Joan Regal and her friend, Emmy Lou something or other. The tall girl who works at NBC and always carries a Baggie full of sprouts wherever she goes. Luke?"

"Yeah?"

Penny had her cheek resting against the door. "Are you O.K. in there?"

"I'm top-hole. Splendid. Fit as a fiddle."

"You sound terrible."

"I've been going over our revised final fall schedule of shows."

"You sound even more terrible than that ought to make you feel. Can I see you?"

After ten seconds he replied, "Why?"

Her shoulder made a silky whisper against the door when she shrugged. "Don't know, just felt I wanted to," she said. "Some nights, one's in the mood for cocoa and graham crackers; some, it's reruns of *Wild Wild West.* Others, I like to gaze at you fondly before I turn in."

"O.K., sure. Hold on."

She heard metal rattle, something raked across his desk top, drawers opened and shut. All in double time.

"As you'll see," he said, voice growing nearer, "I am, all things considered, in pristine mint condition."

The door opened.

He was a long, lean man of thirty-two, blond. He was wearing wrinkled khakis and an old USC sweatshirt. Atop his head sat a woman's hat. A wide-brimmed thing, thirty years old at least, and trimmed with artificial fruit.

Penny studied her husband for a while. "I like everything but the hat."

"Hat?"

She pointed. "It looks delicious, Luke, but it doesn't suit you."

He reached up and snatched it off. "Oh, yeah, this thing."

"Why, exactly, are you wearing it?"

"Why am I wearing it?"

"I was moderately curious."

He looked away from his wife. "It helps me think."

"Oh," she said.

Max Kearny walked out through the gates of the WBS studios complex,



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and sixty-five people began cheering and yelling. He slowed, frowning.

The people, most of them women in the autumn of their lives, were scrambling out of a bus labeled Zuber Studio Tours. The eager tourists weren't interested in Max apparently, but in a dark young man who'd just jumped free of a Jaguar at the curb.

"It's he!"

"Oh, yes, it's he!"

Must be vacationing schoolteachers, Max figured. He halted beside the high studio wall, deciding to wait until the excitement over Guapo Garcia was over before trying to make his way down to where he'd left his car.

"Get your clammy hands off me, you withered old skwacks!" Guapo was saying to the nearest of the ladies who were closing in on him. "G'wan, before I pop you in the bridgework."

"... autograph ..."

"... handsome ..."

"... love *Motorcycle Detectives* ..."

"Hey! Don't go grabbing at my private parts, you raddled old bimbos. Back on board the cattle car, huh?"

"... so cute ..."

"... his grin is just ..."

"... his hair! Feel his hair. ..."

"Hey, you over there!" hollered the actor as he fought through the excited swarm. "Are you Kearny?"

"That's me," nodded Max. "That's I."

"Who's he?"

"Nobody."

"But he must be somebody if Guapo knows him."

"Trust me. He's nobody."

"Son, are you anybody?"

"Not anymore," Max told the crowd.

Guapo used elbows and knees. "What is that? A metal leg, granny? Get it the hell out of my crotch. Huh? Naw, you look for your own crotch. You're lucky I just kicked it away and didn't break it over your wrinkled cabeza. Kearny?"

"The same. What did you want?"

"I don't want a damn thing, pal. But Penny heard you were down from San Francisco, and she—"

"Penny?"

"Penny Merriman. She used to be Penny Karlins. Says she—"

"Sure. Penny. She worked for my ad agency three or four years ago, before she got marri—"

"Anyhow, Kearny, she wants to talk to you. You free?"

He glanced at his watch. "For the next couple of hours or so. What's the—"

"Pen'll tell you." Guapo took hold of Max's arm. "Me, I think it's plain and simple Satanism. With maybe a run-of-the-mill complete and total mental collapse on the side. You see a lot of that in this town, believe me. Come along." He began hustling Max through the screaming, giggling gathering aimed at his car. "You got to kick these old broads or they never get out of your way. Watch that damn cane, mother! Use both elbows, Kearny. Like this."



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In five minutes they reached the car.

"I'm retired from that," Max told Penny.

The two of them were sitting at an outdoor table in front of a small Santa Monica restaurant called Java Man's. Guapo had deposited them there and then roared away to shoot some promo spots for *Motorcycle Detectives.*

Penny sat with her hands folded in her lap. "You've gotten a little gray since I worked for you."

Max was a middle-sized man of forty-two. His dark hair he wore in a sort of shaggy crew cut, and it was indeed gray over the ears. "Who's Guapo?" he asked her.

"Everybody knows Guapo. He's the darn star of—"

"Who's he to you?"

"Oh, we're having an affair, but that's not the problem."

Nodding, Max took a sip of the coffee. "What is?"

"I'm sorry about the coffee," said Penny as she watched him drinking some of it. "The people who run this place are born-again vegetarians. I forgot when I asked Guapo to drop us here."

"Chicory and roasted oats make a fine brew," Max assured her.

She said, "When I read in *Ad Age* that you were in L.A. for a few days to tape some commercials for ... what account is it?"

"Mutt the Democratic Dogfood," he answered. "How'd you know when I'd be coming out of WBS?"

"I had Luke's secretary find out. "Luke's really big at WBS now, Max. Mostly because he's absolutely uncanny at picking which shows are going to be hits and which are going to be flops. It's almost as though ..."

"As though what?"

"Oh, as though he could see into the future or something." Lifting one hand from her lap, she took hold of the handle of her cup. "You might like figs and burnt heather grass better. Want to try mine?"

"This'll do," he said. "You started off by asking if I still worked as an occult investigator. Is your problem a—"

"You haven't really quit, have you? Because when I knew you were in town, I got this very positive feeling that you could help me."

"I never did work at it full time, Penny," he told her, making another try at his imitation coffee. "Years ago, in my vanished youth when I had more pep, I dabbled in ghost breaking. The past few years, though, I haven't—"

"You solved an occult case only a year or so ago, though. In New England. I read about it in, of all places, *Muck* magazine."

"That I did as a favor for some friends. It wasn't meant as a return to my—"

"I'm not exactly a friend, I guess, just a former employee," Penny said with a hopeful smile. "You and I always got along well at Kearny & As-



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sociates. At the very last Christmas party I was at I kissed you, and you didn't wince or anything. And now ... well, I just don't know what to do about him."

"Who are we talking about?"

"Luke, of course. Guapo's just good-looking and sexy." She shook her head. "He's not complex enough to get involved in the occult and the supernatural. How old is your little girl now?"

"Stephanie's thirteen."

"Is she into video games?"

"Moderately."

"Well, Guapo is my video game, sort of." She rested her elbow on the tabletop and leaned toward Max. "Do people still get tangled up with Satan?"

"Sure, far as I know."

"That's what's happened to Luke," she said. "At least as far as I can tell."

"Guapo suggested he might be having some sort of mental breakdown, too."

"Luke's in line for a big promotion," she said, pride showing in her anguished voice. "This is confidential, Max, but it looks like Somerset Gumm's going to be ousted. That'll mean Luke'll be promoted to senior program supervisor, with a hefty salary hike. Anxiety over something like that puts a strain on anybody."

"Tell me more about what's been going on."

"Well, he's been wearing women's hats." She glanced around the bright afternoon sidewalk, waited until two lovely teenaged girls in shorts and high heels went strolling by. "Is that a symptom of anything? And I know he's not gay."

"Women's hats? Different ones at different times or—"

"I've only seen one, actually. It was a dreadful thing, ages old. The sort of thing you'd pick up at a rummage sale or a prop warehouse. Wide-brimmed, dripping with plaster fruit."

Max tapped the tabletop with his forefinger. "What is he doing that makes you think he's involved in Devil worship?"

Penny answered, "First let me explain how unusual what he's able to do at his job is. It all commenced three seasons ago, just after we got married. Luke was only second junior program supervisor then, and one fine day, just before the season got going, he went in to Somerset Gumm and handed him a list of ten shows. He also sent copies of the list to several vice-presidents at WBS. He'd divided the shows into two columns of five each. Five he said'd be hits, five would be bombs. Gumm laughed at him, and the rest of the WBS people thought maybe Luke was on the brink of going goofy. See, he'd predicted that *I Married a Bum* was going to be the top new show of the TV season. And he insisted that *The Sludge Brothers & Myrt Downhome Music Hour* would flop in under five weeks." She paused to take a deep breath. "Max, what Luke was saying went against every poll, every test,



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every sampling that'd been done. Not even the mystic who works for the *National Intruder* thought *I Married a Bum* would have a chance. Fact is, the show only got on because of some complicated tax write-off and even its producers figured they'd be lucky to stay on for even thirteen weeks. Whereas the Sludge Brothers had had fourteen platinum albums in a row and their movie had outgrossed Spielberg's last three."

"But *I Married a Bum* did hit the top of the list, and the brothers did fail," said Max. "We bought time on their show. I'm still getting bitches from our clients about that. How did your husband do it?"

"I don't know — at least I didn't then," Penny said. "When the WBS people realized what Luke had done — he was dead right on all the other shows, too — they asked him that same exact question: How did he do it? Luke gave them that annoying enigmatic smile he uses sometimes and told them, his boss and all the other top WBS honchos, that it was a secret process. Involving advanced demographics and specialized computer data base utilization."

"But you think it involves black magic?"

"Now, yes." She told him what had been happening. How her husband had continued to be right season after season and how WBS had grown increasingly dependent on him. Since he unfailingly picked winners, they need no longer even schedule any losers. They were saving gobs of money and were now the top-rated network in the country.

Luke's salary continued to rise higher and higher. He and Penny had moved into an even larger home early last year, one that a famous silent-screen star had blown his brains out in. All was going well with Luke's career, but they had hardly any domestic life anymore. He was spending all his at-home time locked in his den. Strange smells and strange mutterings came from behind the closed doors. What he was doing involved ancient books, black candles, and other arcane props. Sometimes he'd slip out of the house in the small watches of the night; once she heard him phoning for a cab to take him to the Garden of Allah. Sometimes she heard him muttering names of clubs and bistros that were also long gone from the Hollywood scene.

"I started trying Guapo to take my mind off all this," said Penny. "But he's not much good for that. Max, my husband is mixed up with something awful and ... I want you to save him."

"Does Luke want to be saved?"

She blinked, frowning. "Well, no," she admitted. "His job with WBS has become his whole life, and all this other stuff is somehow tied in with his ability to predict hit shows. But, Max, I'm really afraid that if he keeps this up, it'll destroy him."

Max rubbed his thumb knuckle



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across his chin. "I don't think it's Devil worship," he said. "Not exactly."

"What then? It's something strange and uncanny."

"Can I come out to your place? Look around, talk to Luke?"

"I'd rather you didn't talk to him just yet, but you could drop over tonight," Penny said. "Luke's got to go to an awards dinner."

"Will Guapo be there instead?"

She shook her head. "I never carry on my affairs on home ground," she said. "Can you be there at eight?"

"I can," Max promised.

Max let himself into his motel room, clicked on the lights and crossed over to the phone. Out in the pool someone executed a sloppy cannonball dive. Max punched out a Bay Area number and slumped into the canvas chair next to the phone table.

"Hello?"

"Mrs. Kearny, this is the Pasadena Home for the Incurably Short. We have a Mr. Maxwell Kearny, Jr. here who is sinking fast, and he's babbling about leaving you all his worldly goods."

"Forget it, he doesn't have a cent left. I've already cleaned out his bank account and am about to go winging off to Batavia with the tallest boy on the junior high school basketball team."

"No adultery quips tonight," Max told his wife.

Jillian inquired, "What have you been up to down there?"

"It's starting to look," he said, "as though I didn't give up my old sideline after all."

"You're fooling around with another occult case?"

"Yep."

"How come this never happens when I'm with you?"

"They don't call me the Lone Wolf of Spookdom for nothing, ma'am. How're things at the homestead?"

"Stephanie and I are fine. She's asleep after — this is absolutely true — reading a book instead of watching TV."

"If she reads one more book we'll apply for a scholarship to Stanford."

"I think you've evaded enough. Tell me about this new case."

"The Mutt commercials are going fine. Except for the cocker spaniel getting a bit sick."

"Max, c'mon."

"I was just up at Penny Merriman's. She and her husband live in an impressive place in Beverly Hills."

"Figures. He was always very gung ho. Those are the people who settle up there. Who has the problem?"

"Penny has the notion Luke is dabbling in the black arts." Max took off his shoes and wiggled his stockinged toes. "He was away at some show-biz doings, and I snuck in to look around. Not too tough to pick a den lock."

"He keeps his den locked?"

"That seems to be where he is cur-



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rently carrying on his occult activities."

"Meaning?"

"Get to that shortly. Anyway, Jill, I did find evidence he's been up to something. It isn't, though, Devil worship," Max told his wife. "Actually he seems to be, judging from the mystical residue, trying to summon up spirits of the dead. One spirit, anyway."

"To what purpose?"

"You know how sometimes the dead can help, working usually through a medium, to predict the future. I'm fairly sure that's what Luke's been up to."

"And Luke's spirit's been helping him predict what shows are going to succeed on his network?"

"Exactly. He's done so well at it that he's about to replace his boss."

"He's summoning the ghost himself?"

"At present. Although, by deftly rifling his desk and filing cabinets, I found business cards and memos indicating he'd been consulting several spiritualists in the L.A. area. None more recent than a couple of years ago."

"That must be where he contacted this spirit of his first off," concluded Jillian. "Now that he's established contact, he's summoning it on his own."

"Yep, that's what I think," said Max. "Listen, Jill, I opened a closet behind his desk and found a dozen wacky ladies' hats. Big god-awful things from maybe thirty years ago. With bunches of fruit, flowers, and feathers and, once a toy piano, all over them. Stuff's been picked up at junk shops and the like."

"Is he a transvestite, too?"

"No tranvestite would want to look this silly," Max said. "What does this remind you of? Silly hats and phrases like 'Hello from Hollywood,' 'My next exclusive,' 'Dear Mr. and Mrs. Movie Fan,' 'Here's an open letter to Gary Cooper.' "

"Lotta Lewbers," answered Jillian. "One of the two contenders for the crown of Queen of the Hollywood Gossips."

"She died about when?"

"Oh, must be 1960 at the very latest. Left the field clear to that other gossip war-horse, Nelda Napp. I just recently read a biography about the pair of them, and it said Lotta never feared anyone in Hollywood except Nelda. Seems that old ... Max, it just dawned on me. Luke's somehow summoned up the ghost of Lotta Lewbers."

"Almost certainly," said Max. "And it looks like maybe the old girl's trying to take him over."

"Be a tight fit."

"She probably doesn't have that much choice when it comes to hosts for her."

"You'll have to stop her."

"I will, yes."

"Any notion how?"

"A few," he replied. "First, though, I want to chat with some of the spiritualists Luke consulted originally."



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"They're likely to be frauds."

"One of 'em isn't," said Max.

The man behind the small cluttered desk fluffed his sand-colored beard and asked, "How old would you say I am?"

"Fifty-three," guessed Max.

"Shit," said the bearded man. "So much for bee pollen and brewer's yeast."

"How old are you?"

"Fifty-two. But I've been snarfing down bee pollen till I buzz in my sleep, and I take in enough brewer's yeast to make foam come out of my ears. Yet you surmised I'm a full year older than I actually am. I'm losing ground."

"At least you don't look sixty," said Max helpfully. "Now, Mr. Johnson, I'd like to—"

"Call me Gypsy," invited Gypsy Johnson. "Jack-of-all trades, but currently a publisher." He gestured at the walls of his narrow office. "Some of my current publications."

Max glanced at the girlie-magazine cover proofs. "*Smirk, Wink, Ogle, Sneak.* I've seen them on the newsstands, I'm sure. Now as to why—"

"No, you haven't. I can't get the damn things distributed. Except to one newsstand out in Glendale. I mean, if I were to do radio spots urging the public to grab up my mags at their favorite newsstand, they're going to be shit out of luck unless that joint in Glendale happens to be their favorite."

"You used to be a spirit medium," said Max, looking again at the short list he'd made last night at the Merrimans'.

"Used to be. But the dough in that was pisspoor. Not that it's much better in smut nostalgia."

"What I ... smut nostalgia?"

"I guess I'm a sentimental so-and-so." Gypsy popped up from behind his desk and went over to a wall. He was shorted than Max, even in cowboy boots. "Note this cover of *Smirk*. You'll see the broad's wearing pasties over her kanakas and a pair of demure black lace panties. That's the kind of sex mag I thrilled to as a kid. Now they put it all out on the line like a cafeteria. Hooey." He tapped another cover. "Take a look at this Christmas cover for *Ogle*. Blonde dame in a bra, panties, and a Santa hat. That's my idea of erotic."

"When you were in the spiritualist business," began Max. "Did you—"

"I read about you someplace, Kearny. Years ago."

"I had a modest reputation as ghost breaker."

"That dodge pay much?"

"Nope. Was Luke Merriman one of your clients?"

"Oy!" Gypsy smacked himself against the temple. "That guy. He's the main reason I ... excuse me." He picked up the ringing phone. "Hello, is this about money? Huh? Look, Leroy, read your author's agreement again. No, nope, it doesn't. It says you get paid *near* publication date. What issue was your story in? Last fall. You have a



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point. Leroy, so suppose I send you a few bucks now and the rest ... Huh? What do I mean by 'now'? Next week. Leroy, an attorney isn't ... Leroy? Schmuck." Gypsy hung up. "There's a guy who spells *thigh* with a *T* at each end and he's going to sue me. What were we talking about?"

"How Merriman ruined your spiritualist business."

"Scared the hell out of me, too," confided Gypsy. "See, what this guy wanted was to be able to foretell the future. So Merriman has the notion if he can get in touch with the right kind of spirit, he can work some kind of television prediction thing. Possible, I guess."

"Since spirits exist on a different plane, they can probably see the future some," said Max. "But they're tricky to fool with."

"I'm a living witness to that," said Gypsy. "I never had a very strong gift for summoning up spirits. But if I didn't get a ghost, I was prepared to fake one. But the night Merriman came to me—"

"You got a real ghost."

"Damn right. She starts talking right out of Merriman's mouth. The spirit of some old defunct broad is inside him, see, talking through him. 'Hello from Hollywood,' she says right off, and I know damn well it's no fake. I eventually tumbled to who she was. It was Lotta Lewbers. Remember her? Wore nutty hats and—"

"I remember. How many times did she show up at your seances or—"

"Once." He held up a single finger. "That was plenty enough for me. After that first encounter I decided to go into a new line of work."

"What about Merriman?"

"Well, I gave him — sold him, as a matter of fact — a lot of occult tomes. I explained to him how to work on his own to summon up this ghost." Gypsy tugged at his beard and shook his head. "I didn't want anything more to do with her. Whatever became of Merriman?"

"He's rich and successful."

"No crap? Maybe that old broad really did help him out. I'll still ... excuse me. Hello? You'll do *what*? I'd like to see you try that, Leonard. A guy your size. Listen, you ..."

Nodding, Max rose and took his leave.

Penny opened the front door while Max was still a good ten feet away. "He's worse," she called out into the warm, windy night.

Max sprinted. "How so?"

"Luke locked himself in his den and hour ago." She caught his arm and pulled him into the house as though she were hauling him aboard a storm-tossed ship. "And for the past fifteen minutes there's only been one voice coming out of there. That woman's."

Max gave a quick nod and shifted the paper-wrapped parcel he was carrying up under his other arm. "It's



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O.K. I think I can fix things."

"Luke needs his predictions about the upcoming season by tomorrow morning," Penny explained, leading Max to the locked door. "In a way I can see why he got mixed up with all this occult business in the first place. How else can you could possibly tell if *Living in Sin* is going to do better than *Dick Dallas, Private Dick* or *Going to the Dogs?*"

"At my agency we use a ... never mind."

They'd reached the door.

"... an open letter to Lamar Lunkert. Lam, we all love you in your role in the hit soaper *Omaha*, but these rumors that you and your live-in love are ... that *is* what they call them nowadays, isn't it? Yes ... you and your live-in love, Sue Mary Sype, have been having some awful squabbles. A little bickering is healthy, Lam, but when you give your girl a busted beazer ... No, make that nose ... a busted nose, your loyal fans are going..."

Using the same lockpick he'd used before, Max unlocked the door to the den. "Stay outside here till I call you, Penny," he cautioned. He turned the knob and pushed the door open.

"I don't allow anyone to sit in on my rehearsals, young man. Get lost."

Luke was sitting behind his desk. His face was pale, his mouth slack. He had a wide-brimmed hat on his head, one trimmed with big cloth daisies.

Urging the door shut with his foot, Max went over and sat on the leather sofa next to the desk. "It won't work, Lotta," he said, placing his parcel on his lap.

"Don't be a twerp," came the piping voice.

"The moment someone sees you, you—"

"There's still radio, darling. In many ways it's bigger than it was in my original heyday. I can tape my shows and—"

"And who are you going to tell them you are?"

"My own long-lost daughter, or something along that line." Luke's hand made a sweeping-away gesture. "I'll have a manager to work out the details. The important thing, dear, is that I'm back. Back to stay. I'll have a radio show again, and a newspaper column. You can't imagine how I've missed all the glitter and glamor of this wonderful town while—"

"You've got to leave, go back."

"Nonsense, young man. Not after I've finally found such a perfect host."

Max unwrapped his package. "I'm something of an expert in this area. I was out at Caltech this afternoon, checking this particular spell out on their—"

"Who are you, anyway, a nonentity? Not one of the tinseltown luminaries at all. So why should I—"

"Just listen, though." Max took a slip of paper from his jacket pocket and unfolded it.

"Looks like a very small trifling spell."



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"The spell is only part of it, a strong part but not all," explained Max. "You know how some spirits fear religious relics while others—"

"Pooh," said Lotta through Luke. "Don't go waving a cross at me, darling, because I assure you it won't—"

"I got this later this afternoon. From Nelda Napp." He lifted the framed photo free of the wrappings. "Yep, Nelda Napp is alive at the age of ninety-one, living quietly at the Retired Stars Home in San Fernando. She gladly gave me this portrait of herself to use on you."

"Ugh! Oh, that ugly thing. I don't want to look at her ugly puss." Luke's hand came up to shield his staring eyes. "She hurried me into an early grave with her malice."

Max cleared his throat and read the spell. It was an effective mixture of Latin, Middle English, and a few dead and lost languages.

Halfway through the spell Luke's hand dropped away from his eyes and he stared at the picture of Lotta's arch-rival. "You ought not to ... Oh ... Here's an open letter to Max Kearny. ..."

Luke's body shivered, shuddered. His head jerked far back and his teeth bit at the air. Then he toppled forward onto his desk, smack across the list of the season's new WBS shows. His flowered hat hopped free of his head.

Max finished the reading of the spell. After folding up the paper, he put it back in his coat pocket. Holding the picture of Nelda Napp out in front of him, he got up and approached the desk.

"Luke?"

"Hum?"

"Oh, Max, that was marvelous," said Penny, rushing into the room. "I was listening at a crack at the door. You were wonderful. I really think you should consider doing this kind of work on a full-time—"

"Penny?" Luke sat up, blinking at them. "What the hell's going on?"

"He exorcised you, Luke dear. Don't be mad." Penny hurried over to her husband to put her hand, tentatively, on his shoulder. "That awful gossip was going to take you over, use your body for her own purposes. I didn't want you going around the rest of your days with the ghost of that awful woman inside you."

"Exorcised?" Luke frowned at his wife and then at Max. "You mean she's gone for good?"

"The spell specifies for all eternity." Max set the photo of Nelda Napp on the edge of the desk.

"That's a long time," said Luke. "Jesus, what am I going to do now?"

"You don't need her," Penny assured him. "You have natural ability in this area, and all—"

"How's that natural ability going to tell me what kind of audience a piece of tripe like *Ambulance Chasers* is going to pull?" He was shaking his head from side to side. "I wish you'd have con-



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sulted me before doing this—"

"Luke, she was controlling your body. She didn't intend to let you come back and use it at all."

"She was?"

"Yes. So there wasn't a choice."

"Maybe so, but how am I going to come up with—"

"I'm going to help you, darling. Yes, I'll be much more supportive than I have been, you'll see," Penny told him. "I'll even give up Guapo."

"Who?"

"Guapo. Guapo Garcia, the man I've been having an—"

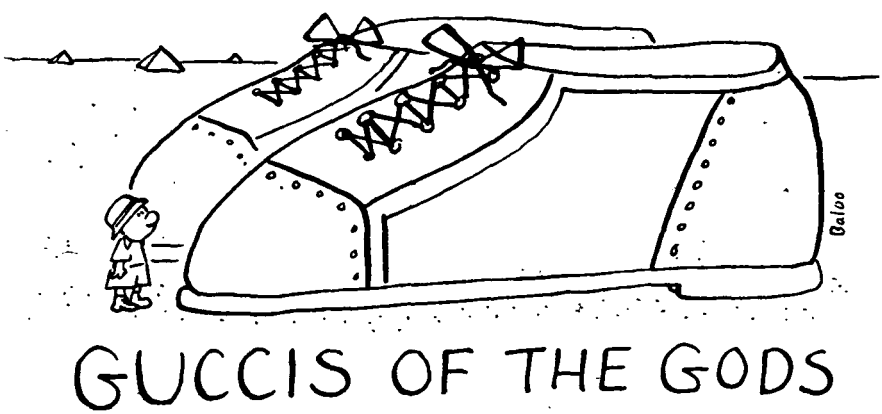
"Yeah, yeah, O.K. But right now I'm going to have to come up with my predictions for tomorrow."

Max backed to the door. " 'Night," he said.

Penny smiled at him. "Thank you, Max. I'm very grateful; so is Luke. Or he will be eventually."

"Yeah, thanks, Kearny." Luke picked up his list of shows. "Maybe we can whip up another way of determining ..."

Max let himself out of the house. The night wind was hot and dry and it rubbed at his skin. Dead leaves swirled around his feet.



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*Lewis Shiner's F&SF stories — "Stuff of Dreams," "Promises," and most recently, "Brujo" (August 1982) all have demonstrated a most inventive and polished approach to SF themes, as does this new tale of first contact between the aliens and young Danny Armbruster.*

# *Nine Hard Questions About the Nature of the Universe*

**BY**
**LEWIS SHINER**

1.

On a Wednesday in November of 1957, nine-year-old Danny Armbruster disappeared from a housing subdivision outside Mesa, Arizona.

His parents had been expecting him back since nightfall, but Danny had picked up a bullhead in the front tire of his bike and was having to walk the bike home.

The sun had just gone down when Danny saw the light in the sky. For a second he thought he'd gotten turned around and was walking eastward into the rising moon. Then he realized that it was the wrong shape for the moon, longer than it was tall, and the color of the light was an intense blue-white, like the glow of the welding torches at his father's plant.

The light continued to grow and began to wobble slightly. Danny caught a glimpse of a deeper, reddish color on the underside of the thing, and suddenly he knew he was seeing a flying saucer.

"No," he said out loud. It couldn't be.

Could it?

He stopped to stare at it. His common sense was pushing at him to run for home, but that would have taken him under the path of the saucer and something about it terrified him.

He could make out the shape of it now, like two dinner plates stuck front to front. A cone of light sprang out of the bottom of the thing and swept toward him over the desert.

Danny couldn't have moved then if he'd wanted to. He remembered a tiny kangaroo rat that he'd seen on the highway once, paralyzed by the lights of his parent's car. His father had



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swerved to miss it, but the little animal had gone under the wheels anyway, as if it had lost control of its own desires.

The machine began to settle on the desert a few hundred feet in front of Danny. Bits of dirt and rock were being sucked up into the weird glow and pinging away into the darkness. Danny felt grains of blowing sand nicking his face and arms, but he made no effort to turn away or cover his eyes, just stood in silence until three small men in silver suits came to lead him onto the ship.

2.

A man from Project Blue Book came to talk to Danny's parents. He listened to Danny's mother describe the eerie lights in the sky and he took pictures of a charred mesquite bush near the road where Danny's bicycle had been found.

The police found no fingerprints but Danny's on the bike, and the FBI declined to investigate when no ransom demands were made.

A year after the boy's disappearance, a middle-aged man in battered clothes came up to Danny's father in the parking lot of the plant where he worked. "Don't worry about your boy," the man said. "The space people have him, but he's all right. He's getting to see things ... things you couldn't imagine."

"Who are you?" Danny's father asked. "What do you want?"

"I just want you not to worry," the man said, and began to walk away.

"Hey!" Danny's father shouted. "Come back!" He chased the old man but lost him in a crowd.

Local police failed to find anyone fitting Armbruster's description of the man, and after a few days they stopped looking.

Armbruster thought long and hard about telling his wife what had happened, but decided against it in the end. In the past year they'd been harassed by letters and phone calls from other "contactees," and the messages only seemed to prolong his wife's suffering. Armbruster couldn't see that the man's words were any real comfort, and after a while he simply forgot about the whole thing.

3.

The aliens were about four feet tall, dressed in silvery uniforms, and so pale that they looked almost gray. Their foreheads were large, their noses little more than the sharp intersection of the planes of their cheeks. Their eyes were outsized and widely separated, and their lips were so thin that their mouths seemed to disappear when they were closed. At first Danny could not tell them apart.

They took him into a room that was as shining and white as a new refrigerator and strapped him to a table that was not quite long enough for him. He didn't think to resist at first,



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but as the things they did to him got more and more unpleasant, he began to be afraid.

They filled his mouth with a gummy pink substance from something that looked like a toothpaste tube. Danny choked on it, but the alien ignored his struggles and held his mouth closed for several seconds, then pulled the wad out and dropped it into a slot on the wall.

The touch of the thing's hand was cold, damp, and scaly, and when it reached for Danny again he tried to pull his head away. Another alien came forward and guided a metal skull cap into position on Danny's head while the first one held him motionless. Danny felt a prickling in his scalp, then a wave of intense pleasure, like the last bell on the last day of school. It was followed just as suddenly by a feeling of weightlessness, then nausea. Danny vomited, and the aliens backed away, letting him turn his head so the stuff would run out of his mouth.

In a few seconds they had reduced him to the level of an animal, shivering, terrified, unable to speak or move. They put adhesive patches on the skin inside his elbows and behind his knees, rolling up his jacket sleeves and pant legs to do it, then tore the patches off and fed them into the wall. They took blood from his left ankle, then pulled his pants down and poked at his genitals with a metal rod.

When they were finished with him two of them carried him out of the laboratory and through a series of white-walled rooms.

The numbness in Danny's brain had worn off. "What are you doing?" he shouted at them. "Where are you taking me?"

Their only answer was to put him in a tiny room and leave him alone there.

4.

Danny cried himself to sleep, lying on what seemed to be a padded shelf that grew out of the wall. It was the only thing in the room that was not hard, white, and shiny.

In the morning they brought him to another part of the ship. One of the aliens handed him a cup with something in it that looked like a vanilla milkshake and smelled like Cream-of-Wheat. His stomach seemed to accept it, and it did clear the bad taste out of his mouth.

The room didn't have any chairs in it, so Danny stayed on his feet. He couldn't see any kind of controls or instruments, only a pedestal in the middle of the floor that held up a fan-shaped piece of sculpture. The sculpture looked like it was made out of white plaster, and the wide end of the fan merged with the ceiling.

"How long are you going to keep me here?" Danny asked. He was taller than any of the aliens, and now that he'd rested he wasn't quite as afraid. "My parents are going to be looking



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for me, you know. You can't just hide me here forever."

"You will not be going back," one of the aliens said. It wasn't speaking English, but the meaning of what it was saying seemed to come into Danny's head anyway. It was a little like a movie he'd seen once, where the people were speaking French but the real words were written on the screen, and you almost felt like you understood what they were saying.

"Look," said another one of the aliens.

The wall in front of Danny began to darken and in seconds it was black enough for pinpoints of light to appear. With a sudden spasm in his leg muscles Danny realized he was looking out into empty space.

In the distance the blackness was washed with a smear of orange light. It looked like a watercolor painting, thickening to make dust-colored mountains and waves, and then thinning away again to nothing. Stars behind it shone with a fierce blue-white glow.

In another part of the sky Danny could see an oval of light, its arms spiraling out into nothingness. The space between the stars was the blackest thing Danny had ever seen, and the sheer quantity and bright color of the stars took his breath away.

He stared at the view for a very long time, trying to get used to the idea of what it meant. Finally he turned back to the aliens and nodded to them.

As they led him back to his cell he was crying again.

In time he got used to the physical hardships — the ceramic-looking bucket for a toilet, the lack of baths or fresh clothing, the monotonous diet. By and large he had the run of the ship, though he never saw anything that looked like a control room.

The worst of it was the boredom. The aliens were all around him, but they refused to talk to him except on the rarest of occasions. There was nothing to read, nothing to watch except the motionless expanse of stars.

Once he stood in the center of the screen room and yelled at them. "Damn you!" he shouted. "Damn you! Don't you care? What kind of people are you? Don't you have any feelings at all?"

One of the aliens finally turned to look at him. "We are not people," it said. "And no, we do not care."

Much later, after Danny was long past being able even to guess at the number of meals he'd eaten or the number of times he'd slept since his kidnapping, something new appeared on the screen.

It was a planet.

As the ship closed in, Danny kept expecting the green-gray blur of the surface to resolve into some kind of recognizable detail. Instead, the alien machine suddenly swerved and dipped into the living soup of the planet's atmosphere.

In seconds he was unable to see



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anything but whirling yellow feathers and smaller green, furry seeds. They seemed to be flying toward him at a fantastic rate of speed, then hanging motionless against the surface of the screen before being whipped away.

Slowly Danny made out a shadow moving in the background. He understood that the image he was watching was like TV, that the things he saw there couldn't actually break through to reach him. But all the same he found himself squirming away from the thing that was approaching the ship.

It looked, at least in outline, a little like the giant prehistoric insects he'd seen in dinosaur books, but much, much bigger. It was only when the thing stopped and hovered directly in front of the camera that Danny could see all the hideous differences.

A huge, oval mouth, surrounded by loose flaps of skin, took up most of what must have been its head. The rest of its body was lopsided and covered with what looked like a dusty growth of white mold. The puffballs and green seeds were being sucked continually into the mouth, and about halfway down the belly something that looked like an open sore dripped continually into the air.

"What is it?" Danny asked one of the aliens.

"It is what it is."

That was more of an answer than Danny had expected, but he wasn't satisfied. "Is that supposed to be a riddle?"

"What you are to your planet, it is here."

"You mean, that thing can think?"

"It has a language amd fights wars. It has a God."

That night Danny had a nightmare about the monster's God. Ever since his parents had told him that Santa Claus and the tooth fairy were not real he had been wondering if God wasn't more of the same thing. He'd never had the nerve to ask his parents about it, and now it was too late.

5.

Something else had happened to Danny in the endless time since he'd been brought on board the ship.

Wispy, colorless hair had begun to grow on his face and body, and his voice had started to crack. The thing he still thought of as his weenie would sometimes swell up and become very sensitive, especially in the mornings. He found that by moving a certain way he could relieve the pressure, though he felt guilty afterwards from the resulting mess.

The monotony that he'd been living with for so long became intolerable. He attacked one of the aliens, but before Danny could do more than raise his arm to throw a punch, he felt a vibration go up his spine and he passed out. He awoke locked in his cell, and he beat on the walls and screamed until he was too exhausted to move.

In time they let him out again, and



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though he'd learned better than to assault them it didn't make him any less sullen and irritable. He might have tried it again anyway if something more interesting hadn't come up.

It was another planet, Earthlike, but the sight of its one vast continent quickly put an end to any hopes he had of coming home. He watched in disappointment as the ship settled in a city of cubical white buildings.

Aliens from the ship led him through a maze of hallways and into a room that had obviously been designed for him. It had a bed, even though the bedspread, pillows, and sheets were all part of the same molded piece. It had a desk with paper and pens, shelves with real books, and best of all, a bathroom with a toilet and a shower. Several sets of loose cotton pants and shirts were laid out on the bed. Two screens set into the wall showed an Earth-like field and a clear blue sky, and when the overhead light was turned off the screens showed a moonlit version of the same view.

The divisions were arbitrary, but at least he had day and night again.

When he'd washed and put on his new clothes he started on the books. There were multiple copies of most of them, as if the aliens had hijacked a trainload of books and just piled them on the shelves without caring what they were. One group seemed to be a shipment of war novels, another was diet and exercise books. Other clusters were science fiction, Peterson field guides (*Birds, Rocks and Minerals*, etc.), and one entire shelf of paperbacks in French.

He went through the novels first, skimming, looking for the parts where men and women were together.. He learned a little, but it only seemed to make his curiosity worse.

One day the door to his room opened and a girl walked in. Danny had been sitting at his desk, writing a letter to his parents that he knew they would never see.

He was stunned by the sight of her. He thought at first that he was just making her up, but then she combed through her dark, curly hair with one hand and pulled it back, kept pulling it back until he could see her entire hairline, and still she was pulling on it, until tears were starting to well up in her eyes.

Danny knew he couldn't be imagining anything that strange. "Hey," he said. "Are you okay?"

She was maybe a little older than Danny, her small breasts just showing under the long, shapeless dress that she wore, and she did not seem to be all right at all. Her eyes were puzzled and there was a slackness around her mouth. Her body was thick with excess weight, and Danny wondered how she could have gotten fat on the tasteless food the aliens gave him.

He went over to her and gently worked her fingers loose from her hair. Her eyes followed him, but she didn't seem to have any real interest in him



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until he started to back away. Then she made a bleating sort of noise and threw her arms around him.

She smelled clean and Danny found himself getting excited by the touch of her, even though the weird way she was acting made him nervous.

"Can you talk?" he asked her, working her arms loose and sitting her on the edge of the bed next to him. "Can you say anything at all?" Now that he was over the initial shock, he could see that she was not all that nice to look at. Her eyes were small and puffy, her nose flat and thick, and her skin looked like it had been rubbed in oil.

"Can you tell me your name?"

"Muh-muh-muh...." the girl said.

In a moment of insight, Danny realized that she hadn't survived the things that he had been through, the repeated shocks, the isolation, the horror of the aliens that was always around them.

"Mary?" he asked. "Is that your name?" When she didn't answer, he tried to smile at her. "Well, that's what I'll call you, O.K.?"

She seemed calmed by the sound of his voice. When he stood up, she let him go, and he kept an eye on her while he walked to the door.

"Hey," he said loudly. "What am I supposed to do? Can you hear me? There's something wrong with this one. You understand? She's broken. I can't fix her, if that's what you want."

He got no answer. For the rest of his day she watched him while he read or drew or walked aimlessly around the room. When he tried to talk to her, she just stared at him.

Eventually he took a bath and went to bed, dressed for once because the girl was there. She had fallen asleep on the bed, and he lay down carefully so he wouldn't wake her and turned off the light.

Sleep wouldn't come. Every time the girl shifted her weight his eyes came open and his heart began to beat loudly. He felt like he'd been lying there for hours when he noticed that she wasn't asleep anymore. By the sound of her breathing he could tell that she'd turned to face him.

Then she began to touch him. Danny was embarrassed at first, then a little frightened. But her hands were knowing and insistent, and he felt sick and feverish and could not make himself pull away from her.

She took his trousers down and began to stroke his penis. He knew what was going to happen, but before it could she rolled on her back and began to pull at him.

"What?" he whispered. "What do you want?"

She kept grabbing at his waist and his legs until he finally rolled on top of her. She took hold of his penis and began to pull at it, and he started to lose his erection, not understanding what she wanted, ashamed because he didn't know what to do.

She took his right hand and placed



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it over her breast. He felt the end of her breast get hard and it made the same thing happen to his penis. She pulled at him, and then he felt his penis sliding into something warm and wet. Her hips moved jerkily under him and he exploded inside her.

Lights were flashing in front of his eyes and he was gasping for breath. He could smell something he'd never smelled before, an earthy, exciting odor that at the same time made him feel disgusted and sad.

The girl groaned and started to snore. Suddenly clearheaded, Danny was appalled at what he'd done. He had made sex with this ... this thing, that was ugly and brain-damaged, little better than an animal.

He went to the bathroom and washed himself, then lay down on the part of floor that was sculpted to look like a rug. To his own surprise he was asleep in seconds.

The shame was still with him when he woke up. He ignored the girl all day, and when he was ready for bed he turned out the lights. She reached for him and he pushed her away. The second time she came for him he pushed her so hard that she slid off the bed and sat on the floor, crying quietly. Danny stayed on the bed, his arms folded, unable to sleep. After a while he turned the lights on and read again, and when he absolutely couldn't stay awake any longer he fell asleep on the floor.

When he woke up she was gone.

* * *

6.

After that, whenever he found himself thinking about the girl, remembering the smell of what they'd done, or the feeling of her breast in his hand, Danny would exercise. One of the health books was about something called "yoga," and Danny found out that the harder he practiced at it, the better he felt.

He began to build himself up. He knew he was getting taller by the way his clothes fit him, and before long he could see the shape of his body changing, his stomach flattening and the muscle turning to hard outlines under his pale skin.

He would cover the drain in the shower with his hand and look at himself in the pool of water there, sometimes for an hour at a time. He was fit, he thought. Fit and ready. But for what?

He had nicknamed the alien who brought him food Fremount, after the character in "Pogo." The little alien wouldn't tell him what its real name was, and answered only the most direct questions. One day another alien brought the cup, this one with more wrinkles around its protruding eyes and a forward tilt to its walk.

"Where's Fremount?" Danny asked.

"Drink this and come with me," it said.

Danny swallowed the food in two gulps and decided he would call this



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one Howland Owl. "What's up?" he asked, but Howland didn't answer, instead leading him down a series of unfamiliar white corridors. At the end of one of them was a room divided in half by some kind of glass. On the other side was a dwarfish, naked creature with a face like a Neanderthal. It's entire body was covered with long, widely separated black hairs.

"You may talk," Howland said.

"Hello?" Danny said.

"He gives you greetings," Howland translated. At least Danny assumed Howland was translating, since it was looking at the dwarf, even though Danny could understand what Howland was saying. Maybe, Danny thought, it's the same for the dwarf as it is for me: we can both understand anything the aliens say. Like mind reading, only mind writing.

Howland turned back to Danny. "It asks you how you retain your water."

"What?"

Howland repeated the question.

"I don't understand," Danny said. "What does he mean?"

Howland made a gesture that Danny decided was supposed to be a shrug.

"Ask him...." Danny said, "...ask him if he has a family."

Howland relayed the question, then said, "It says it will have had. It asks if you are light."

"Light?"

Howland moved its hands as if it were stroking a large globe. "Light," it said.

Danny felt his eyes begin to sting. "Tell him to make sense. I can't understand what he's asking me. Can't you see that?" He wanted to hit something. Mostly he wanted to hit the hairy little dwarf, but he would have taken a swing at Howland if he'd thought he could get away with it.

Howland brought Danny back to his room, and the next day Fremount brought him his food, as usual.

7.

Danny had made a calendar, and every time he slept he marked off a day. He knew it wasn't accurate, but it helped tie him to the passing time. By his reckoning, the visit with the dwarfish alien was followed by nearly two years without a significant incident.

He exercised. He read. He sat in the lotus position, thinking about as little as it was humanly possible to think.

In the dark he dreamed about his parents, about forests and mountains, about dogs and fish, about school, about half-remembered girls and women he had known.

Waking up was always the hardest part.

He seemed to have stopped growing. His beard, when he didn't use the depilatory cream the aliens gave him, came in dark and full. Dark hair covered his legs and his crotch. Whenever he asked them, the aliens would cut his hair with some kind of pistol that had no blades and made no noise. Lately



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one or two of the fallen hairs would be white.

He read and he exercised and he tried to keep the voices in his head quiet.

Until the woman came.

Danny's first reaction, when she had knocked on his door and simply walked in, was shyness. His brain was so stunned that it was fully five minutes before he heard anything she said, or even really noticed what she looked like.

She was at least pretty, by anyone's standards. Her hair was long and reddish brown, her eyes a clear gray. It seemed to Danny at first that she was younger than he was, but it turned out that she had been taken the same year he had, 1957, and she had been twelve at the time.

Her name was Autumn.

"That's a beautiful name," Danny told her.

"Yes," she said, "it is."

Nothing that Danny had to say to her seemed important enough, so he kept to his embarrassed silence. When it went on too long, Autumn smiled and went to the door.

"I'm just down the hall," she said. "Come and see me later." As if they were two people who'd met in a hotel somewhere. And then she went away.

Danny stood where she had been and sniffed the air, believing he could sense a lingering sweetness there. He felt flushed and off-balance, and his heart was beating so loudly and so strangely that he thought it might just stop at any second.

He sat on the floor and fought for control. He concentrated on not moving until enough time passed that it didn't seem so urgent anymore. Then he made himself wait just a little longer, and then he got up and went to her.

Her room was identical to his, except that the books on the shelves were different. She sat on the bed and brushed her hair, over and over, while he looked through the books.

"You've been here a long time, haven't you?" she said.

"Yes."

"Long enough to read all those books of yours?"

"Three and four times."

After a while he sat on the bed and touched her hand. She didn't pull it away, but she didn't move closer to him either. She just sat there, and smiled at him in a vague sort of way.

He wanted to put his penis in her, but she was so self-possessed, so alien in her own way, that he didn't know if he should try. He didn't even know if he should ask her.

So they talked about other things until they were both falling asleep between sentences. She told him how she'd been on a ship the entire time until she met Danny. That she had grown up in Chicago, that her parents were musicians, and that she would have been a dancer but she'd grown too tall.

When Danny went back to his room he dreamed about the two of them in a



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huge house that had grass for carpets and slow, strange animals for furniture. He woke up refreshed and excited and went to her room, but her lights were still off. He went back to his own room and exercised until he was tired enough to sleep a little more.

Among all the other strangenesses, it bothered Danny to see how much their rhythm of day and night were different.

They spent another day talking, some of it reading quietly, and then they spent another night apart. All the time a peculiar tension was building in him, and on the third day it broke.

They were looking at his books together when her shoulder brushed his. He turned and put his hand around her elbow.

She looked at him and smiled.

He touched her breast, his fingers shaking, and she smiled again. He put his arms around her and kissed her clumsily, and she put her arms around his waist. He led her to the bed and took her clothes off. He almost wanted to cry when he saw how soft and smooth and tautly muscled her body was.

"Have you ... have you done this before?" he asked.

"No," she said. Her eyes were a little out of focus and her voice was shaking.

As he knelt between her legs he was suddenly frightened. He turned off the lights, but it didn't help him get hard again. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I don't really know what I'm doing either."

"It's O.K.," she said. She held him, and he ran his hand through her hair, wondering at the way it smelled.

Love, he thought. I'm in love. Is it really this easy? What happens now?

He never fell asleep, just seemed to float, and thoughts went spinning around in his mind, and after a long time he wasn't afraid anymore.

Autumn's place was tight and very dry and not at all the same as Mary's had been. Afterwards there was blood on the bed, but Autumn said that was all right, that it was supposed to be that way.

For a long time Danny couldn't get to sleep. He wished he had somebody to talk to, somebody who could explain all the things he was feeling. If he was grown up now, why did he still feel like a little boy? If it was right for him to do what he did with Autumn, why did he feel so guilty?

In time the sex got better and the guilt went away, as if it hadn't really been guilt in the first place but something else. He told Autumn that he loved her and told himself that it didn't really matter that she didn't say it back to him.

It was about two of Danny's months later that Autumn told him she was pregnant. It had been a happy time for both of them, Danny teaching her yoga, Autumn teaching him to dance. They read together, slept together, even showered together, and now they



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were going to have a child together.

"Are you sure?" he asked her.

"Pretty sure. I didn't bleed last month, and I feel sick when I wake up, and well, I can just feel it."

"That's wonderful!"

"Is it?"

"Isn't it? What's the matter?"

"The matter? What's the matter? Look around you! Do you see any doctors? Anybody who knows anything about medicine at all? And if the baby is born, *if*, then where is he going to grow up? In these two little rooms? And never see the sky or trees or birds or other people? And you ask me what's the *matter?*"

He held her until she cried herself out. "It'll make us a family," Danny said. "That's all that matters, that we're a family and that we love each other, right?"

Autumn didn't answer him.

During the pregnancy they quarreled more and more often. Autumn would make love only after Danny sulked for days at a time. She was clearly frightened that something would go wrong, and any time the rhythm of her body changed she would panic.

When her water broke she began to scream hysterically. Danny was in the other room, where he'd been spending most of his time lately, and he got to her about the same time the aliens did.

One of them, he thought, was Howland Owl, the one that had taken him to see the dwarf, but the aliens said nothing to him, just led Autumn away.

Time slowed. He tried reading, tried meditating, even tried sleeping, but everything ended in his nervously pacing the room. When Autumn finally came back she was pale, exhausted, and no longer pregnant.

"The baby...." Danny asked, afraid to hear her answer.

"They took her," Autumn said flatly.

"Took her?"

"I heard her cry. She was alive, she was crying, and they took her away." Autumn lay down and went to sleep. Danny stretched out beside her, and it seemed that he'd just closed his eyes when Autumn's screams woke him.

The aliens came for her and they wouldn't let Danny go with them. He sat on the edge of the bed, not allowing himself to think, until Fremount brought him his food again.

"What have you done with her?"

"She is sick," Fremount said. "She will be back."

"And the baby?"

Fremount turned away.

"The baby!" Danny shouted. "What about the little girl?"

The door closed in his face.

They're going to keep the baby, he thought, If it had been humans he was dealing with, they would have at least have had the decency to lie, to tell him she was dead. But the aliens didn't care.

For the first time since the ship he hated them, blindly, savagely, and the



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hate kept him going until they finally brought Autumn back.

She was completely empty. She refused to eat, sitting all day in her room with her arms wrapped around her legs, staring into space. If he tried to comfort her, she jerked away from his touch, startled by it. She slept badly, moaning and screaming herself awake. There didn't seem to be anything Danny could do for her except to stay away from her.

Finally she began to eat again, and her sleep became quieter. She slept most of the time, and during the brief periods she was awake she managed an occasional smile.

She even let him make love to her again, but only during her period. "No more babies," she whispered to him afterwards. "Not ever again. They won't take anything from me again."

8.

In Autumn's room was a shelf of physics books. After Danny had read everything else he started in on them. They were tough going at first, but he found himself enjoying the challenge.

One day the alien he called Howland Owl came for him again. It brought Danny into a long, narrow white room. Nine of the aliens sat along one side of it, looking like a jury on a TV show.

"What do you see," one of them asked him, "when you are performing sex?"

"See?" Danny asked.

"Do you see God?" asked another one.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Last night," said yet another one of them. "You were performing sex and the woman said, 'Oh God.' What did she mean?"

"You were *listening?*" Danny said. He knew he should be shocked, but it didn't even truly surprise him.

"Answer the question," Howland said.

"You're crazy. God doesn't have anything to do with it. It's just something people say."

"Then when *do* you see your God?" another asked.

Danny hesitated, then came out with something he'd been wanting to say for a long time. "I don't have a God. If there was a God I wouldn't be here. It's just something they tell kids to make them think that things make sense. Just another fairy tale."

He waited for lightning to strike, and when it didn't happen he was almost disappointed.

"Do many of you feel this way?"

"Many people? I don't know. Maybe they all do."

After a silence Howland said, "Come. I will take you back to your room."

"Just a minute," Danny said, picking out one of the aliens and staring at him. "I want to see my daughter."

The alien returned his stare. "The



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child does not belong to you."

"Like hell," Danny said. "What are you afraid of? Why won't you let me see her? For God's sake, she's my daughter!"

"Why," the alien said, "do you ask for a favor in the name of a God that you do not believe in?"

Danny charged the alien, and the next thing he knew he was lying on the bed in his room.

He told Autumn about it and she nodded. "I went through most of that on the ship. That's what they do."

"Snoop? Steal babies?"

"No," she said. "Haven't they ever told you? They're looking for God. I don't think they quite mean it the way we do. I mean, they're not looking for a big old man with white hair. But that's their job."

"Their job?" Danny began to laugh. "All of them? All of those space ships, those other planets, those other aliens? Their *job?*" Tears started to roll down his face. "That's why they kidnapped us? To look for *God?*"

He cried until his whole body felt dried out, and then he slept, longer and deeper than he had for a long time.

One day he tried to ask Fremount about their ships. "It says here," he said, pointing to the physics book, "that nothing can move faster than the speed of light. What about your ships? How do they do it?"

"I will ask," Fremount said, and a while later an alien that Danny had never seen before came to the room.

"I will help you with your questions," it said.

"Is it true," Danny asked, "that your ships go faster than light?"

"Faster?" the alien said. "How do you mean faster?"

Danny had the same sinking feeling he'd experienced trying to talk to the hairy dwarf. Very carefully he explained the speed of light, using Astronomical Units since he assumed the aliens would be familiar with the distance from the Earth to the Sun.

"Are you trying to tell me," the alien said at last, "that light is either a particle or a wave?"

"Yes."

"But it isn't. Light is simply a state of the ether."

Danny went back to the book and showed the alien the Michelson-Morely experiment which disproved the existence of the ether.

The alien picked up the book and read several pages, its bulbous eyes flickering back and forth across the lines.

"Look," the alien said. "It says here that someone named FitzGerald could explain those same results as a compression of the ether."

Danny named the alien P. T. Bridgeport, and a few days later he sent for it again. He showed it something called the Double Slit experiment, where, under certain conditions, a stream of photons would create an interference pattern. The only explanation for the results of the experiment was that the



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photons had some sort of consciousness.

"I don't understand," Danny said.

"Nor do I," Bridgeport said. "I have performed an experiment similar to this, and these are not the results that I got. May I borrow this?"

Danny pointed to several duplicate copies on the shelf. "Help yourself. But haven't you read it already?"

"Why?" Bridgeport asked him. "What could we possibly learn from your primitive science?"

When Bridgeport returned it had changed somehow. In a human it might have seemed like increased age or fatigue, but Danny had been around aliens long enough to recognize that something had gone drastically wrong with its body.

"Well?" Danny asked.

Bridgeport was quiet a long time, and then finally it said, "When I run the experiment, I get the interference pattern, just like in your book. I never got an interference pattern before. When I leave and my assistant runs the experiment ... there is no pattern."

"What are you trying to tell me?"

"In your book. The man Heisenberg. He says that the outcome of an experiment is determined by the results that are looked for. This is more or less what he says. It seems this is even more true than he realized."

"But ... which is the real answer?"

"Both. Either. Any answer you like."

"My God."

"No. There is no God in this. If there is today, maybe not tomorrow." Bridgeport got up and began walking away.

"Wait," Danny said. "Come back. I want to ask you...."

The alien was gone.

The next time Fremount brought him his food, Danny asked for Bridgeport.

"That one is dead," Fremount said.

Danny was stunned. "Dead? But how?"

"I am not to talk to you," Fremount said, and left.

Danny went to Autumn's room. They spent so little time together that their schedules were out of synch, but this time Danny found her awake.

"I think I killed one of them," Danny said.

"You're kidding."

"I don't think so."

"How'd you do it?"

"Physics," Danny said. "Or maybe religion. I'm not sure I know the difference anymore."

"Good," Autumn said, going back to her book. "Kill them all. All of them."

9.

A few days later they came for him. If he'd known where they were taking him he would have packed some books, or some of the letters he'd written. As it was he didn't even get to say goodbye to Autumn.



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The first he realized he was on a ship was when a wall near him turned dark and he saw the stars again. His heart began pounding with new hope. He searched the ship, finally finding one of the aliens, and poured his questions out: were they taking him home? What about Autumn? How long would it take?

The alien ignored him.

He exercised and meditated and slept. He thought about Autumn more than he wanted to. He kept count of the number of times he slept, into the hundreds, then gave up. He started counting again, got into the hundreds again, and gave up for good.

He hung on.

When he finally saw Earth in the viewscreen he was almost afraid to hope. He sat crosslegged on the floor, staring into the heavy clouds that covered the planet, straining to see a landmark. And then the clouds broke, and he could see the telltale shape of the Mediterranean and the long curve of Africa dropping away, and he cried for the last time in his life.

The saucer let him out in Texas, dressed in his loose white robes and carrying a few hundred dollars in cash and enough small disks of pure gold to last him a while. He'd read about time dilation and Einstein's twin paradox, and he hoped the money would still be good.

"Aren't you going to say good-bye?" he asked one of the aliens as he stood in the open port of the ship.

"Good-bye," the alien said tonelessly.

Danny walked over a hill and saw a ribbon of asphalt leading off into the distance. He sat in the hot sand at the top of the hill and smelled the sunlight.

He had spent long hours deciding what he would do if he ever got back, how he would lie low, spend his time in whatever equivalent of a library the future had, and learn enough to blend in.

The one thing he was not prepared for was to find that the world had not changed.

He stood in a Greyhound station in Temple, Texas, looking at a newspaper dated June 6, 1958.

He thought about Bridgeport's experiment and wondered if it was 1958 only because Danny's imagination hadn't been strong enough to take him any further into the future.

He used some of his cash on a suit of Salvation Army clothes and a bus ticket to Arizona. He kept the gold in his boots and barricaded the door of the room he slept in.

He couldn't get over the richness of the smells in the air.

By Albuquerque he had the flu and spent two weeks in a motel, convinced he was going to die. In the delirium of his fever objects seemed to lose their focus. Everything around him turned into random patterns of energy, mere conditions of the ether, and he had the sensation of sinking into the bed.

He was terrified. It had become a



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question of faith, not in God, but in something more basic, and his faith was slipping. Suddenly he knew how the alien he called Bridgeport must have felt.

I am going to believe, he told himself. I believe in furniture, and in floors. I believe in clothes and food and bodies with skins that don't sink into mattresses. Whether they are real or not. They are going to be real because I am going to choose to believe in them.

A few hours later his fever broke, and he slept.

Once he was back in Mesa he observed his parents for several weeks, and finally, unable to resist, he tried to talk to his father. His father not only didn't recognize him, but seemed frightened by him, so Danny left him alone.

He bought several magazines off the newsstand that promised to explain UFOs to him. He managed to read half of one of them before throwing them away.

He took a job working for a landscape company, where he was liked but never really befriended. His employers respected his good physical condition and his love for growing things and tolerated his occasional periods of dreaminess.

He spent his last years in a rest home in Scottsdale, Arizona, finally marrying another patient there. Until the week of his death he sponsored an ad in the personal columns of newspapers in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles that read: "Autumn, please call me, Danny," followed by his address and phone number. None of the replies were genuine.

His funeral, in December of 1975, was small, attended by his wife and some of the other patients from the rest home. After the service a strange light was seen in the sky, hovering, then disappearing at a tremendous rate of speed. The Air Force declined to investigate.

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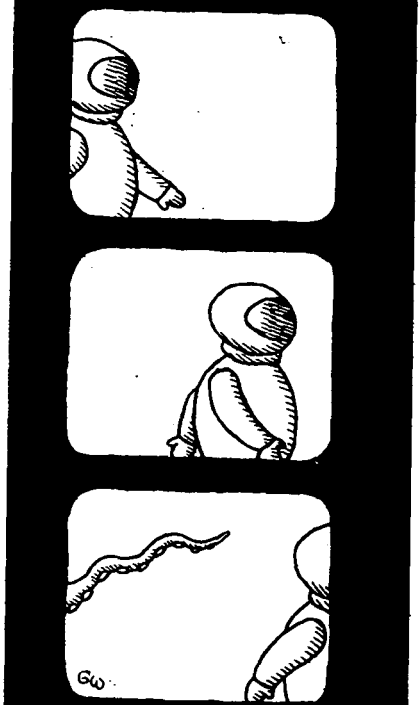
# Films

## BAIRD SEARLES



*Drawing by Gahan Wilson*

## IN THE GLOAMING

The problems with *Twilight Zone — The Movie* are time and space, even though Rod Serling assures us that the Twilight Zone is beyond both. Before we go into that, let me clarify once again where I stand *re* the original; where one enters the Twilight Zone *from* could have a lot to do with how one feels about the movie. I was not a child of the Twilight Zone, but I know for many it was the initial revelation at a tender age of a sense of wonder, and I respect the deep nostalgia which endears the show, thanks to reruns, to what is now several generations. (I have that pleasurable feeling about old pulp magazines with names such as *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* and *Thrilling Wonder Stories.*) Though most of the episodes look thin and simplistic to an outsider, particularly one who's read a lot of s/f and fantasy, there must be a validity there to have captured so many, and turned them on rather than *off* fantasy.

But the many episodes of *The Twilight Zone* are very much of their time and place, despite their influence over the years. The sparse black and white production for the little screens of the early 1960s are part of their very essence; they are small-scaled playlets built around one idea, "gimmick" if you will. To throw them forward 20 years in time, and enlarge them for the big screen in space, successfully, requires a finesse that just doesn't show



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up in *Twilight Zone — The Movie.*

It could certainly be debated endlessly as to the wisdom of re-producing old episodes rather than producing new ones that might have captured the spirit of *The Twilight Zone* in a contemporary vein. (Three of the four stories in the movie are direct reworkings of specific shows from the series; the other was "suggested by" several old episodes.) That's a question of the might-have-been; certainly there's a film technique and sociology thesis in the difference between the old and new versions of each story.

The first, the amalgamation of several stories, is perhaps the weakest; this could be because of the tragedy that occurred during filming (certainly the death of Vic Morrow forced a truncated final form). But its basic idea of a contemporary bigot thrust by some unknown circumstance into the shoes of a Jew in Nazi-occupied France, a black at a lynching, and a participant in the Viet Nam war is incredibly dated, if only by its simplistic '50s style message; things seem a lot more complicated these days.

"Kick the Can" gives us the inhabitants of an old folks' home who are suddenly reverted to childhood by a sort of geriatrics genie. The ungrateful wretches don't like it, save for one, a Douglas Fairbanks Sr. devotee, who doesn't re-age when the others do (but with "fresh young minds" — urgh) and flies out the window, presumably to be Peter Pan when he grows up. There's the germ of a touching idea here, especially with the defector, but Stephen Spielberg directed this one with all his usual attention to extracting every possible bit of cuteness.

"It's A Good Life" (screenplay by Richard Matheson based on a story by Jerome Bixby) shows us a family dominated by a pre-adolescent boy who has Powers. He, in fact, can make anything happen, and family life is a delirious round of junk food and TV cartoons, with horrendous punishments for anyone who demurs. The production here is interesting, with an interweaving of reality and animation that is sometimes quite subtle. The story is less so, though, and sort of peters out as the young monster is borne off under the wing of a manipulative young woman. (One rather thinks they deserve each other.)

Certainly the unqualified success of the four segments is "Nightmare At 20,000 Feet" (directed by George *Road Warrior* Miller), a retelling of the boy who cried wolf in the form of an airline passenger who cries gremlin. It benefits from super performances by John Lithgow as the agonized passenger and Abbe Lane as a sympathetic attendant, the sustained tension of an airplane in trouble, and a really nasty creature. The brief glimpses of the thing on the wing at 20,000 feet have a terrifying beauty, as does its wild exit; here is authentic scariness by implication. While this one episode does not the movie make, Miller has at least suc-



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ceeded in successfully transcending the old show while not violating its principles.

As for the "frame" for the four (the end of "Nightmare" is linked to a cute little anecdote which opens the proceedings), it's hardly worth mentioning, despite the presence of Dan Aykroyd (or perhaps because of?).

Maybe the form is the major problem with *Twilight Zone — The Movie*, i.e. the anthology format; movies made up of short stories have never been very satisfying, somehow, and now TV has made that form its own — what are most of the series but half-hour or hour long "short stories" which bear (almost) the same relationship to a full-length film that a printed short story does to a novel? There's something jarring about going to a movie theater and being presented with four television episodes, no matter how artfully they have been inflated for the big screen. Could be it's just the cliche Scotsman in me that resents paying the horrendous box office prices for four playlets. ("Gloaming," in case you're wondering, is Scots dialect for twilight.)

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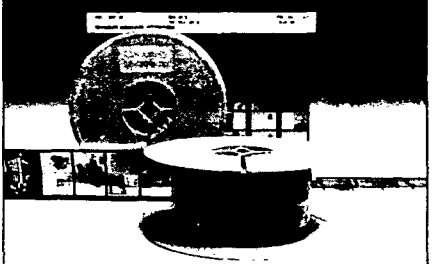

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*Barbara Owens ("Professor Smitt's Amazing Tiny Town," July 1983) returns with a story about an unfortunate woman named Harriet Wirtz, whose only satisfying relationship was with a house plant...*

# Precious Thing

BY

**BARBARA OWENS**

Some unfortunate souls seem to be born victims. Harriet Wirtz was one.

From a solid lumpy baby she traveled uneasily into a stolid lumpy child — a sideliner, easy to intimidate and eager to please, never expecting much, never disappointed. Her adolescence was distinguished by four dates, not one of them a repeater. Harriet arrived at maturity large and pale, shaped like an egg, peering anxiously at the world through thick lenses, long resigned to never having things work out. She seldom looked anyone in the eye.

When she was on the downhill side of thirty, Max Wirtz found her — Harriet's secret heart revived ancient young dreams of cozy chintz evenings at home with little feet pitty-patting through the house. She overlooked Max's runty apelike body, his thin ferret face; she hadn't been introduced yet to his dark warty soul. When Max announced he'd decided to marry her, she was grateful. She didn't know Max's secret dream — he looked forward to a long and happy lifetime of torment.

Their wedded life was never bliss. Soon Harriet discovered that some souls are born to be bullies, and she had gotten the prize. She never learned any deep-rooted psychological reasons for his nature; gradually she came to accept the fact that Max just enjoyed being mean — he hated everything and everybody.

With one possible exception. He was ecstatic with their marriage. And with her. For Harriet, in domesticity, was wondrous to behold. Things leaped off shelves and tables at her approach, smashing into pieces at her feet — pots and pans slid off the stove on sight of her, splattering their contents



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wildly. Her pitiful attempts at decorating their apartment sent Max into rapture. She could always be counted on to catch or maim some part of her body in household appliances — instead of erasing her husband's shameful ring-around-the-collar, Harriet was resigned to winding up with a finger hopelessly trapped in the stain-remover bottle.

And Max was always there, at her side, cheering her on. His happiest times were the rare occasions when unsuspecting guests could be snared for dinner. He would have Harriet quivering before their arrival, humiliate her throughout the meal, then top it off by inviting the visitors into the kitchen while she straightened up, just to watch her break things.

This was all unpleasant for Harriet, of course, but her biggest disappointment was the absence of those little feet pitty-patting through the house.

"Are you kidding?" Max had raised his eyebrows in mock horror at her shy suggestion. "You'd probably drop 'em on their heads! Nossir — and no doggies, kitties, fishies, or birds that go tweet-tweet. Nothin' — I hate 'em all."

Sometimes, in the beginning, Harriet mustered courage to answer back, but after Max bounced her head off the wall a few times, she gave up. She subsided into a silent accepting shadow, dully living out her due.

Their marriage was ten glorious years old on the day that Max, a plumbing contractor, had to go out of town on business. He left Harriet with a little money — not much, but she was accustomed to less. Feeling an uncharacteristic urge, a restlessness, Harriet decided to celebrate by indulging in a favorite pastime — strolling through a nearby shopping mall. She never bought anything, but she liked to window-shop and watch the people, and no one ever paid attention to a large pale egg with glasses.

It was a fresh spring day, the kind when everything seems larger than life. Harriet mingled in the crowded mall, watching, listening, pausing now and then to sit on a bench, looking at the people going by. She was doing this when someone joined her on the bench; quickly, without making eye contact, Harriet rose and hurried away.

Directly in front of her was a florist shop; the display in its window caught her eye. Plants and flowers sprawled in jungle abandon — bright, green, freshly dewed. They were beautiful; it looked so quiet and peaceful inside. Without realizing it, she stepped through the door. The air inside was cool and sweet, smelling of moist, rich earth and fragile bloom. Harriet smiled, breathing deep.

No one was in sight; hesitantly she crept across the floor, nearsighted eyes watchful for the towers of clay pots that seemed designed for her to knock them crashing, the hanging macrame holders waiting to snare an arm or leg or neck. Green — everywhere — beau-



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tiful glossy leaves, rich glowing colors. Harriet was lost in a new world; the young clerk was at her side before she saw him.

"May I help you, ma'am?"

"Oh!" Harriet stumbled backward, startled. Her elbow brushed a tower of pots and she felt like crying, but the tower didn't fall and the young clerk smiled kindly.

"Were you looking for something in particular?"

"What? Uh — no, I was — I was just looking." She tried to edge away, but she'd backed into a corner between two stacks of pots — there was no way out. She trembled, trapped, eyes focused on the young man's shiny shoes. "I — I wouldn't be any good at growing things," she mumbled apologetically.

"Are you sure? We may have just the thing for you. On special — *Nephrolepis Bostoniensis* — easiest plant in the world to grow."

Harriet licked dry lips. "*Nephro* — what?"

He smiled wider. "Boston fern. Come here, I'll show you."

She was steered helplessly across the floor to a large hanging display near the rear.

"Now look," the clerk said. "Aren't they pretty? And, believe me, there's nothing to making them grow."

Harriet couldn't raise her eyes above the clerk's left shoulder. "Um," she uttered weakly.

"What do you think? I'll give you some tips. Want to try it?"

She would have bought the shop if he had offered it. "I'll take one," she whispered. "Can I go now?"

Mutely she waited while he boxed it and removed a sweaty bill from her palm. "Just give it good light, plenty of water and love. You'll be surprised how quickly it responds. Thank you, and please come again."

Harriet marched blindly homeward with the fern held stiffly at arm's length. "Light. Water. Good love," she whispered to herself. "Good water. Love. Light."

Once it was installed in the living room window, she stood back to have a look. "It'll die," she said aloud. And remembered. "And Max will kill me. We're both going to die," she assured the fern calmly. But it looked so pretty there, tender young fronds just beginning their graceful droop.

"Where'd you get that thing?" were Max's first words. "What is it, some kind of weed? You'd better not have spent any money on it. Get it out of here, Harriet, I don't like its looks."

Harriet swallowed hard. "Max? Can't I keep it, please? It's just a little plant."

Max's eyes narrowed. He started to speak, but there was something in Harriet's voice that stopped him. He thought. Finally he nodded, mouth twisting into what might pass for a smile.

"Well, O.K. Just keep it out of my way."



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"Oh, thank you, Max, thank you, thank you."

His generousity was soon explained. While Harriet would be preparing a wretched dinner, Max would hand her a fistful of crumpled green leaves. "Little something extra for the salad," he'd offer innocently, and Harriet would utter a little moan.

"Hey, Harriet, come here!" At her dutiful appearance, he'd hold a lighted match under a soft frond. "Look how that thing curls up!" The look on Harriet's face would send him chortling from the room.

Despite his treatment, the young fern began to grow. Established leaves lengthened, and each day there seemed to be new ones, furry little heads poking through the black dirt, beginning almost immediately to unroll into slender young fronds. Harriet was enchanted. She watched it, hung over it, counted the new shoots every day.

"Look — just look at all the babies. Oh, lovely. You're precious, you precious, precious thing."

She took out a library card, bringing books home by the armload on plants and their proper care. She watered it, fed it, misted its lacy foliage until it glistened, talked to it constantly; sometimes she imagined she heard a soft answering whisper somewhere deep in its leaves.

"You talking to it now?" Max jeered, coming up on her unexpectedly one day. "What're you doing, Harriet, getting weird?"

Harriet flushed, embarrassed. "Well, some books say they respond to love," she murmured, avoiding his eyes.

He snorted. "Yeah? How do the books say they respond to this?" He covered the fern with a heavy cloud of cigar smoke, laughing at Harriet's stricken face.

"Oh, Precious Thing, I'm sorry," she whispered after he'd gone. "Did he hurt you? Max isn't very nice sometimes, but don't worry, I'll take care of you." This time she was almost certain she heard a soft rustling in its leaves.

As Precious Thing continued to thrive, Harriet started holding back some of her household money. When she had enough she journeyed back to the florist shop, returning with a delicate young spider plant — she hung it next to Precious Thing on the wall.

"Precious, this is Lulu. Lulu, Precious Thing. I know you girls will get along just fine."

Max had a fit, but Harriet pleaded, and again he relented — surely two plants to torture could be more fun than one.

As Lulu grew, Harriet became possessed. She read everything on house plants she could find. One whole kitchen cabinet was stuffed with fertilizers, sprays, vitamins, and clever plant-care tools. New plants kept appearing. After an ornamental fig materialized one day, Max put his foot down. Absolutely no more money would be spent on weeds. Harriet was to keep an



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account book, and he would review it weekly — he wanted to know where each and every penny went. Obediently, Harriet agreed; she kept her account book and, without thinking twice, began stealing small bills and spare change from Max's pockets, hiding them until she had enought to buy another plant. Max was at a loss — she wouldn't tell him where she was getting money, not even after a smack or two. He didn't know how to handle Harriet anymore.

Within a year the apartment was alive with plant life — ferns, ivies, philodendrons, caladiums, even a statuesque anthurium named Daphne. Precious Thing had outgrown two containers and was still going — her fronds cascaded five feet to the floor, and three grown men holding hands couldn't have reached around her. Everything Harriet touched grew; she was beginning to explore the care and tending of tropical orchids. One of her greatest joys was to sit quietly in the apartment listening to the multitude of sighs and whispers as the plants talked to one another. Gradually she was beginning to understand them.

Although she wasn't aware of it, Harriet had changed. She seldom dropped things anymore, she hadn't been caught in the sweeper for months — even her egg shape had trimmed noticeably.

One day two ladies from her building came knocking at her door. They'd heard from the super, they said, that Mrs. Wirtz had a way with plants. They belonged to the Gracie Street Garden Club, they said, and might they come inside and see? Harriet was so astonished at having visitors that she let them in, and they were almost speechless, they were so impressed with what they saw.

"We have never, never seen a Boston fern that big," they assured her solemnly. "All your plants are the largest of their kind, I'm sure. Whatever is your secret, dear?"

Harriet blushed furiously. "I — I just love them all, I guess."

Straightaway they asked her to join their club, and before she thought about it she said yes. Max almost swallowed his cigar when he heard, ratty face only inches from hers as he impressed upon her his intention that she wouldn't. Harriet's hands twisted together, but she looked straight down into his eyes and said calmly, "I understand your feelings, Max, but I've decided that I will." His consternation was so great he couldn't lift a finger against her.

Harriet joined the Gracie Street Garden Club. Max took to drink.

Almost immediately Harriet found herself in demand. The neighborhood newspaper ran pictures of Precious Thing on its garden page — the feature was an interview with Harriet. Soon she was being invited to speak to other garden clubs; at first she refused, but



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finally she did, and was overcome with her success.

"People listen to me! Sometimes they actually applaud," she announced to her assemblage. The answering sighs and rustlings were a fervent echo of that applause.

Max still mistreated the plants at every opportunity, particularly Precious Thing, but they continued to thrive in spite of him, and even Harriet didn't react as she used to. Once she even asked him politely to stop. Something had gone wrong somewhere.

In the spring a group of the club ladies asked Harriet if they could submit her name for president in the upcoming election. She was overwhelmed. "Can you imagine?" she told Precious Thing. "Isn't it exciting?"

Just days before the election, Eunice Grubb called Harriet on the phone. Eunice had a neck like a turkey and was chairlady of the nominating committee. She informed Harriet that she had personally discouraged the ladies from submitting her as their nominee.

"I thought it only right that I tell you this myself," she added magnanimously. "You have lovely plants and we're proud to have you as a member, but you *are* new to the club and perhaps not quite the image we look for in a president." The ladies decided to submit Eunice's name instead. "I hope you understand."

Harriet blinked several times and said she understood. Her heart ached at the sad sighs her plants emitted when they received the news.

That night Max came home nasty. He was getting ready to leave for an out-of-town lodge convention; his personal celebration had already begun. All through dinner he sneered and snarled at Harriet — nothing she said or did was right. He was still muttering to himself as he started weaving toward the bedroom to pack his bag. Harriet began gathering up dirty dishes.

Suddenly there was a loud cry, and a crash resounded from the living room. Max was pulling himself up off the floor as Harriet rushed in; Precious Thing teetered precariously on her stand.

Max glared at Harriet. "That stinking fern tripped me!" He lurched sideways and fell again, slamming into the fern's stand. Harriet leaped forward, but it was to protect Precious Thing, not aid Max, and he saw. He came up off the floor, little eyes red and mean.

"Awright, Harriet, awright!" he hissed. "You've done it now, kid. Out, they all go out!"

She was paralyzed. Not one muscle could she move as a maidenhair fern crashed with a sickening thud to the floor. A young ivy sailed across the room, smashing against the wall. More followed — and more — and as each fell, shattered, Max trampled tender roots and soil into the rug. His frenzy grew, spittle spraying as he waded through the destruction. "See? See,



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Harriet? Look at this!" He cast longing eyes on Precious Thing, but knew he couldn't lift her; he settled on Lulu, snatching her off her hook and holding her outstretched, eyes boring into Harriet's.

"Gone, Harriet," he panted. "When I get back — every damn one of them gone, you hear?"

She watched Lulu flying toward her, but couldn't move. Max's drunken aim sent the heavy pot catapulting into the wall beside her head; she heard the explosion and felt a flying chip slice her just above the eye. Dimly she watched Max stagger from the room — then her ears were filled with a sound like high winds moaning through distant trees.

While Max yodeled drunkenly in the shower, she lifted fifty dollars from his wallet. After he'd gone, repeating he'd be home Sunday and if she knew what was good for her ..., she cleaned and bandaged her face, then spent half the night salvaging every plant she could and repairing the damage to the living room. Next morning she took the fifty dollars, marched resolutely to the florist shop, and arranged for delivery of replacements for every lost one.

"I just don't know what to do," she worried, tamping fresh new soil and nearsightedly ladling out B-1. "I can't go anywhere, I have nowhere to go. I don't know what I'll do, but I won't give you all up."

By Saturday night she was desperate; she still had no solution. Head aching, she went to bed, and spent a fitful night. Once she woke in the dark, heart pounding — she thought she'd dreamed of dark places, loud thuds and thumps, and Max's voice, screaming.

When she opened her bedroom door Sunday morning, she was met with the dark brown smell of stale cigars. Wondering, she stepped into the living room and stopped short.

Precious Thing looked like an example of an unusual Christmas tree — bits and pieces of color festooned her lacy green leaves. Harriet reached for her glasses and peered closer.

Shredded scraps of a red plaid jacket, chewed bits of shoe leather, messy chunks of a bright yellow tie. A wallet and gold lodge ring lay, rejected, on the floor.

For a long time Harriet just looked. "My goodness," she said finally. "Looks like Max came home early."

Precious Thing burped, a discreet ladylike sound. She looked decidedly mussed and ruffled.

Harriet sat down and thought things out. After a while she gathered each bit of Precious Thing's decorations and burned them in a bucket. Then she got dressed, drove Max's car far across town and abandoned it in front of a massage parlor, leaving his empty wallet and monogrammed gold lodge ring inside. It took her over an hour by bus to reach her home again.

Delighted sighs and warm golden sunshine greeted her as she opened her



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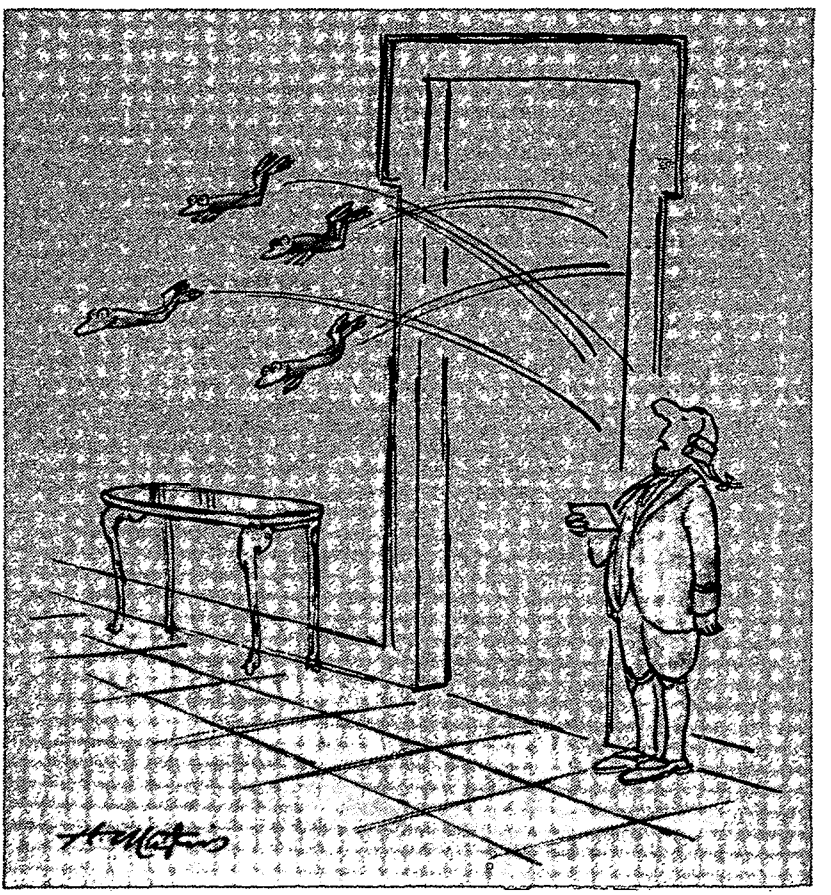
front door. Harriet spent a long while caring for her plants — then, humming, she brewed a pot of coffee and made hot cinnamon toast. She ate it in the living room, lounging back on the sofa, feet propped on the coffee table — a large jaunty egg with a bandage over her eye.

"Precious Thing, I've been thinking," she said, munching contentedly. "Remember me telling you about Eunice Grubb? The one with the long stringy neck? I think I'll ask her to dinner sometime soon — to show I understand. You think perhaps you might like that?"



*"Their royal highnesses, Princes Ed, Fred, Ned and Ted of Leaprovia."*



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*Harvey Jacobs' new story is the tale of an outrageous on location shoot that turns into the most sensational advertising campaign in the galaxy.*

# Busby

BY

## HARVEY JACOBS

The first expedition to the planet Busby noticed the incredible profusion of foliage.

The second expedition documented the marvelous vegetables that grew there: their quantity, their quality, their wonderful taste.

The third expedition determined that there was nothing special about the climate of Busby nor the generic makeup of its plants, flowers, and edibles. The lush growth was attributed to a soil additive. After extensive research, it was discovered that the additive was nothing more than the normal evacuations of Busbians, who had the habit of relieving themselves whenever and wherever they felt the urge. Their droppings were the difference.

Since Busby was considered of the Seventh World, i.e., in a most primitive phase of development, the Galactic Council decided on a special fate for the planet. Its inhabitants were to be nurtured like privileged pets and fed copious amounts of food. A large percentage of Busbian emissions were to be collected through the use of a very elaborate and costly sewage system, then processed and shipped to the developed orbs, where they would be used to stimulate crop production. The plan took time since it required a certain amount of Busbian re-think, but ultimately it worked splendidly.

The great advertising firm of Savage, Gossamer & LeVine, Ltd. was hired first to teach the Busbians to formalize their movements, i.e., to use gathering huts. Second, the Busbians had to be encouraged to eat and eat and eat. Since they were intelligent creatures, they could not be force-fed like French geese. Their consumption was necessarily a matter of open choice. The free markets, like the gath-



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ering huts, had to be sold to the Busbians, who were familiar with a hunting and fishing economy. Savage, Gossamer, and LeVine succeeded marvelously with the cooperation of Galaxy Central. Laws were passed to strictly regulate Busby media. Nothing *thin* was permissible. Even (or especially) the art galleries which managed to survive on Busby could display only flaccid nudes. The idea that fat was beautiful was communicated quickly and effectively to the receptive population. Excessive movement was discouraged. Thus the Busbians ate and drank, embraced a passive culture, and produced incredible amounts of *Busbygrow* for export. Savage, Gossamer & LeVine received the coveted Class One Clio Award for a job well done.

Naturally, Busby was held in supreme contempt by the more civilized planets. Busby jokes were part of every comic's patter. "I've got to Busby" became an accepted, even universal, expression. Since the Busbians did not know any of this, it didn't bother them. They got free food, free drink, a round-the-clock TV service, splendid housing, and fine medical care. All they had to do in return was what they would have done without any of those highly desirable perks.

On Busby the people made jokes about their customers who snapped up bushels of *Busbygrow* as fast as they could be packaged. On Busby they thumbed magazines filled with erotic pictures of the chubby gorgeous, read books in which enormous men and women triumphed over the skimpy, and saw programs whose ratings seemed determined by the tonnage of the cast. On Busby they were happy enough.

Now it came to pass that Savage, Gossamer & LeVine, while still No. 1 in the advertising universe (having parlayed its success with Project Busby to attract a blue-chip client list), became engaged in a rivalry with an upstart agency, Thrust Associates. Thrust Associates succeeded in signing some prestigious accounts and the industry sensed its momentum. The creative director for Thrust woke up one morning with an inspiration for a new campaign. The client was a company that sold diet aids. The creative director phoned Bradford Thomas, one of his trustworthy writers.

"Brad, are you awake enough to hear what I have to say?"

"Yes. I think so. If the damned birds don't drown you out."

"What birds? You live in the city."

"Right. It's not the birds. It's the plumbing. The plumbing chirps. What the hell time is it?"

"Don't matter. Listen. Are you ready for this? We do the commercial for Slendorable ... on Busby."

"You must be crazy. First of all, it's impossible. Second, it's illegal. Third, it's fabulous. Fabulous."

"I knew you'd erupt to the idea, Brad. Let's take a meeting. This could be big."



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"Big is right. I mean, big is wrong. You know what I mean. Hey, did you hear that pipe sing? It does that every morning. Lord, I love my life."

Bradford Thomas found himself on a transport ship one month later headed for Busby. Along with him was Derek Lane, a film maker of enormous reputation; Hansen Brodovich, a sound engineer; and Cookie Fountain, the most beautiful model on planet Earth, a former Ms. Dipper. They carried forged credentials which proclaimed that they were part of the ship's crew. The transport was a gigantic tanker filled with sour cream, bananas, a variety of custards, and a million assorted pastries. It was, of course, designed to return with a shipment of *Busbygrow*, with a cargo turnaround time of six hours. The trip to Busby took twenty twenty-four hour days, so there was time for conceptual development. Brad Thomas, Derek Lane, Hansen Brodovich, and Cookie Fountain spent endless hours discussing their shoot. The temptations aboard the transport were hard to resist. The men ate like horses. Cookie Fountain could force herself to regurgitate like an ancient Roman, so she ate, too.

The plan was simple. They would use equipment so compact as to be unnoticeable. They would set up outside Busby Stadium. The favorite (and only) certified sport on the planet was slothing. Competitive slothers hung upside down from vines and tendrils until one (the loser) fell ... the agony of defeat. Professional slothing was a mania on Busby and it was the time for the Sloth Cup. No question but the stadium would be jammed. It could hold seventy-two thousand Busbians comfortably, it had one hundred dispensing counters and six hundred food-givers who roamed the stands handing out traditional Busbian delicacies. The stadium was equipped with its own gathering tanks. Busbians never had to leave their seats to remain productive.

Bradford Thomas came up with a commercial that would show Cookie Fountain against this backdrop. Shots of Busbians, bulging and breathing hard in their excitement, stuffing themselves in perpetual input, struggling to applaud the victors with fat arms, would counterpoint Cookie Fountain's amazing grace. She was lightness itself, beautifully curved yet delicate as a web ... it was almost as if she were a radiant hologram with form but no weight.

*WIDE SHOT of Busbians waddling to stadium. HIGH-ANGLE SHOT of COOKIE in bikini.*

COOKIE

From up here, Busby Stadium looks pretty ... but down there ... it's a bowl of lard....

*MEDIUM SHOTS of Busbians gorging.*

COOKIE

I don't know about you guys, but I'm glad I come from a place where you can get Slendorable and stay adorable....



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MEDIUM SHOTS of sloth players hanging from vines

COOKIE

I've got plenty of hangups ... but fat isn't one of them, thanks to....

IMPOSE Slendorable logo over picture.

COOKIE

So it's buzz me ... not Busby ... with Slendorable.

COOKIE, sitting on rock, faces camera. Around her, fat Busbian children play ring-around-the-rosy.

COOKIE

On the planet Busby, this is Cookie Fountain, saying: Slendorize with Slendorable ... 'cause fat's deplorable!

Sloth player falls from vine to *plop* sound effect.

On the final night of the trip to Busby, Bradford Thomas looked over his copy. It was masterful. It would create a real sensation around the galaxy. Thrust Associates had promised that the team would be defended by the best lawyers against any litigation, should it come to that. At worst, the team could expect a fine, which the agency would gladly pay, or a few days in jail — measured against the attendant publicity and reward. It was worth it to do the first commercial from a "forbidden" planet.

Slendorable, Inc. had agreed in the bargain to purchase one thousand shares of stock in Bradford Thomas's name. It was a terrific stock. As Slendorable sold, the stock grew obese with profit. After this campaign, it would go through the roof. With his share of the pie, Bradford Thomas could afford, finally, to resign from his nine-to-five job. He could become a consultant if necessary.

But his real ambition was to write novels. Now he would have the wherewithal. He thought of himself sitting by the sea, or at the lip of a lake, writing slowly and carefully, probing for the word, in tune with himself, with nature, with all creation. He had worked in advertising for fifteen years, waiting for this chance to escape with sufficient velocity to achieve his own orbit. Now that the moment had come, he vowed not to blow it.

Every step in the strategy of achievement had been gone over again and again, from the landing on Busby, to smuggling in the camera and film, to setting up, to bribing innocent Busbian kiddies with rainbow colored candies, to disguising Cookie Fountain and the crew in fat suits that inflated like balloons, to returning quickly to the transport and remaining hidden in a false vat built to contain *Busbygrow*. Once the ship had left Busby, the rest was a clear sail. The commercial would be edited aboard, and ready to show in the Ms. Dipper pageant, the most-watched program in the star system (banned on Busby).

Thinking on the future, the irony of things did not escape Bradford Thomas. In truth, his life-style was not too different from that of the average



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Busbian. Working in advertising, writing hymns of praise to products, most of which were unnecessary or defective, then using the money he was paid for rent, food, and such creature comforts as he enjoyed. Like any Busbian, Bradford Thomas lived off his droppings. The few stories he had submitted for publication, and his one attempt at a novel, had been quickly rejected. It was not his art they wanted, it was his feces. What Busbians accomplished with their rear ends he accomplished with his head. Now the commercial for Slendorable would allow him to wallow in beauty, to live out his days writing as he wished — and so much the better if his work found an audience.

Life is mysterious and full of surprise. Bradford Thomas's mother used to say that — and how right she was! "Patience, son," she would say. "It will come to you in time." Because she had died of anorexia, Bradford Thomas had qualms about working for Slendorable, Inc., even indirectly. But he knew his mother would have approved of his decision. She was romantic, but practical. Her fatal diet had been aimed at keeping Bradford Thomas's father at home, since he had an eye for ladies who looked like Cookie Fountain (or tried to).

His mother practically disappeared before Bradford Thomas's very eyes, but what she lost in weight she gained in wisdom and never lost her optimism. "Patience, son. It will come to you in time." When her time came, she weighed less than their dog. She was transparent in places and made remarks about her son being able to "see through her." At least the end was peaceful. A wind lifted her like a leaf and dropped her far out in the Atlantic off East Hampton beach. But her faith remained with Bradford Thomas, along with her belief in literature.

Cookie Fountain came to Bradford Thomas's quarters at midnight. She wore a robe of gold mesh, and high-heeled shoes.

"I'm very tense," she said. "I always get that way before a major shoot. Suppose we're spotted. Suppose they know what we're up to at Savage, Gossamer & LeVine. Then what?"

"Be calm," Bradford Thomas said. "Nothing will go wrong."

"Suppose that when we're hiding in the vat they make a mistake and pump it full of Busby balls. What a way to die."

"You're not going to die, darling. You're going to be even more famous than you are now."

"Are you sure, Brad? Are you definite?"

"Absolutely, Cookie."

"What were you thinking about? Revisions?"

"I was thinking about my mother, rest her soul."

"Oh. I didn't mean to interrupt. Oh, Brad, I can't sleep. I can't. I'm an ugly, terrible creature."

Bradford Thomas reached out to



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comfort her. A few hours from touchdown, he made love to a former Ms. Dipper. Holding her in his arms, careful not to squash her in passion, he smiled to himself. Sometimes things go well. Not often. Sometimes.

The shoot went well.

The commercial was an astonishing success.

Bradford Thomas's one thousand shares of Slendorable, Inc. split, split again, like healthy cells and made him rich beyond his dreams.

He bought a house in East Hampton and spent his days watching the ocean and writing a flood of stories, poems, and novels that exposed the human condition.

After threatening all kinds of legal action, Savage, Gossamer & LeVine withdrew all complaint in the face of Slendorable's triumph and public reaction. Then they offered Bradford Thomas a job as supervisor of concept transformation. And he could turn it down with a flourish.

He even found a publisher, a small obscure house, but a publisher. He agreed, quietly, to subsidize the printing of his own work when the publisher teetered on the verge of bankruptcy — but why not? His books got no review space, but he knew that they would. Patience. Time. He quietly arranged for his publisher to contract for full pages of advertising he himself had written. When the ads were placed and paid for, he would get his reviews. All fields need fertilizing.

Sure enough, one day his publisher called.

"Brad, I have incredible news."

"You sold a copy in Texas?"

"Better. Your books are taking off like hotcakes."

"Curious. I can't even find them in the bookstores. I once found one behind a Hedonesque Romance under an *International Enquirer*, but that's it."

"Not here, Brad. Not on Earth. You know how many writers were discovered first on other planets."

"Well, tell me, where?"

"On Busby. They love your stuff on Busby!"

Bradford Thomas looked out at the sea then up at the sky and suddenly believed in God the Architect.

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*Gordon Linzner wrote "Sand," (May 1982). His latest story is a bizarre twist on a fantasy/horror theme, as a local sheriff investigates a series of mysterious and brutal killings.*

# The Lunatic

BY

## GORDON LINZNER

Three months earlier, Sheriff Dan Coswell would have shot the black Labrador on sight.

Its round mahogany eyes followed Coswell as he picked his way down the steep side of the gully. The tail flicked with interest, further agitating the tall weeds whose movement, seen from the road on a windless dawn, had aroused Coswell's curiosity. The dog seemed friendly but shy, unsure of its reception. It did not display the foaming jaws or savagely exposed teeth characteristic of rabies. Coswell stopped five paces away and looked at the corpse beside the Lab. No. No animal killed like that.

Coswell had drawn his revolver, just in case. He beckoned with his free hand. "Here, boy. Come away from there."

The dog growled deeply. Coswell raised his gun. An animal didn't have to be rabid to be dangerous. Then the growl faded to a whimper. Slowly, the dog got to its feet beside the body and started forward. Coswell offered an empty palm for the Lab's inspection. The hand shook slightly, not from fear of the dog but because, as the rising sun brightened the sky, he saw the body more clearly.

It was a boy's corpse, tall enough for early teens, only a few years older than the sheriff's own son, Dan Jr. Identification would not be easy; the head had been pounded almost flat. The torso was also savaged, a rent exposing the stomach cavity. Near fragments of brain and skull lay a fence post from the roadside. Glistening maroon streaked the weathered gray wood.

Coswell's legs felt rubbery and his throat burned, but he controlled the urge to vomit. He was becoming used



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to such scenes. No; inured to them. He would never get used to this horror.

The dog finished sniffing and licked Coswell's fingertips. The sheriff met its standards.

"Sheriff? Dan?"

The voice was that of Richard Grier, a volunteer deputy who'd accompanied him on this all-night patrol, and who'd stayed with the patrol car while Coswell entered the gully. Normally, a one-man patrol sufficed for Lansdale and the surrounding farms, and after-midnight patrols were almost unheard of. Lansdale hadn't been normal for many weeks.

Coswell twisted his neck, peering up the steep slope. Grier's thin, boyish face was barely visible above the weeds. The boy couldn't be seen from the gully's crest.

"Don't bother coming down, Dick," Coswell said. "I'll stay. You go wake up Doc Abbot."

"Dear God. Another one?"

Coswell's silence was eloquent.

As the roar of the patrol car's motor melted away, the sheriff settled heavily onto a dewy patch of grass. The dog followed to sit patiently by his knees. Coswell holstered his gun and reached across to scratch the Lab's neck. A throaty sigh rewarded him. The animal whimpered when Coswell's hand moved up behind the ear, but it did not pull away. Coswell frowned. The skin beneath the fur felt abraded. He withdrew his hand, found it sticky with blood. He grimaced. The dog wasn't hurt that badly; the gore had to be from lying beside the dead boy.

Sheriff Coswell felt the full weight of his fifty-five years, and then some.

"Christ, I wish you could talk!" the sheriff muttered. "What happened, boy? Was he your master? Did you try to help him and get smacked in the head for your trouble?"

The dog rubbed its head against his open hand. The sheriff obliged by once more scratching the uninjured scruff.

The dog's survival had a number of explanations. The madman — for Coswell knew early on that no sane person was responsible for these outrages — might have thought he'd slain the dog when in fact he'd only stunned it. More likely, he didn't care whether the Lab lived or not. There was even a possibility that the killer didn't *want* to harm the dog more than necessary. As far as Coswell could determine, no animal had fallen victim to this murderous spree.

The slayer was interested only in human blood.

Flies came to cover the body, landing to feed or lay eggs. Coswell wanted to shoo them away, but didn't. He'd been up all night, with very little sleep the night before. He hadn't slept well since the terror began. The flies would just keep coming back. He should've asked Grier to toss down a blanket or the tarp from the trunk of the patrol car. Couldn't expect Grier to think of that himself. He wasn't a regular lawman.



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The dog, appeased for the moment, gently pulled free of Coswell's hand and stretched out beside him, resting a paw and its muzzle on the sheriff's scarred boot. Coswell stroked the gore-matted fur along its flank.

"You're a witness, you know that, boy? The first one to get a close look at this nutcase and live. I'll bet you'd be tickled pink to point the accusing finger — I mean paw — at the man who struck you."

The Lab sighed.

"You're O.K. now, boy. Lansdale's going to take good care of its star witness."

The tail thumped against Coswell's rump.

Well after noon, the patrol car kicked up gravel in Coswell's driveway. Alerted by the sound, Dan, Jr., careened about the corner of the house to throw himself laughing into his father's arms the moment Coswell climbed out of the car. Lines newly etched into the sheriff's face that morning smoothed. Growling mock anger, Coswell grasped his son around the waist and lifted, ignoring the throb in his lower back. The boy shrieked with glee. His small hands rubbed Coswell's bald patch.

"I can see myself!" he cried.

Coswell nuzzled his day-and-a-half-old stubble against the youngster's tender neck. After a brief stoicism, the boy yielded with an "Ouch!" Coswell lowered him then, more quickly than he used to.

"Whoosh! You're getting too big for this sort of thing."

But the youngster's attention was now focused on the black shape pressing its nose against the patrol car's rear window.

"A dog! A new dog!" He paused. "Is he mine? For keeps?"

Coswell patted his son's head. "I may have to borrow him for a day or so but, yes, he's yours, Danny."

The boy reached for the door handle.

"Not yet, son. First he needs a collar and leash. Remember where we kept Butch's?" Butch had been a Collie-Shephard cross who, three weeks earlier, ran onto the road at the wrong time. The truck driver had been decent enough, but no amount of sympathy or cash could replace a boy's pet.

"Under the kitchen sink. I'll get it!"

As Danny yanked open the screen door, his mother appeared behind it. Marion Coswell was a slim woman, in her early thirties, dressed in cut-off jeans and a loose sleeveless blouse. She grasped Danny's shoulders to keep from being bowled over.

"What have I told you about running in the house?"

"Dad got the new dog, just like he promised he would!"

Marion glanced at her husband, peeved that he hadn't consulted her. They usually made such decisions together. But her husband stood so



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smugly beside the patrol car, and it had been so long since she'd seen him honestly happy, that she forgave him at once.

"That's nice, Danny, but I still don't want you running indoors. It's dangerous. Understand?"

"I won't," he answered solemnly. He kept his word for all of three paces.

Coswell enjoyed the sight of Marion as she came forward, her cheerful sunburnt face driving the day's horror from his mind. When, in his mid-forties, he had decided to marry for the first time, there were few in Lansdale who hadn't considered him a fool for taking up with a woman twenty years his junior. Many even told him so. Ah, but they didn't know Marion. Not once since their wedding had he regretted dismissing all that sage, unasked-for advice. The only thing about the age difference that bothered him, sometimes, was that Marion would one day be his widow. That was still too far off to dwell on.

He started toward her. Marion quickened her pace and intercepted him at the edge of the driveway. Her long, cool fingers tickled his leathery neck as her tongue probed his dry lips.

Coswell held her tightly, inhaling her fresh scent, then reluctantly loosened his grip, keeping an arm about her waist. "Danny will be back any second," he warned.

"Why do you think I ran?"

"You shouldn't start anything we can't finish."

"Your lunch will take half an hour to heat in the oven. That's plenty of time." She frowned as the lines began creasing Coswell's face again. "Oh, I'm sorry, Dan. You must be beat. If you'd rather take a nap, that's all right." Her eyes sparkled mischievously. "I can wait ... for a little while."

Coswell sighed, shook his head. "I'm sorry, Marion. I can't stay."

"Not even for lunch? You've got to eat."

He patted her rear. "Not even for appetizers. I only stopped by to drop off the dog. Sorry I didn't phone first."

"I'm surprised you remember where we live, the rate you've been going. Dan, you've got to stop pushing yourself. I know Sid isn't very bright, and the volunteers lack experience, but you can't keep treating these killings as your responsibility alone. If you *must* spend hours reviewing those files, at least bring them home once in a while."

Coswell shook his head. "I wasn't reviewing files, Marion."

"Then why ... oh. Oh, no."

He nodded grimly. She felt his arm muscles tighten. "A boy this time, a little older than Danny. In a gully south of the bypass. The dog ... this dog was there."

Marion stiffened, licked her lips, pulled away from Coswell to peer into the back seat. The Lab panted at her. It was a warm day, even warmer inside the car with the air-conditioner off.

"He looks all right," she said dubi-



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ously, "but are you sure that...?"

"I wouldn't bring him here if I weren't. He tried to defend the dead boy. Someone hit him on the side of the head, but no real damage was done. The vet examined him and cleaned him up. There was some blood on his coat, just from proximity. He wasn't worrying the corpse."

Small feet thudded nearby. "I've got it!" Danny shouted, holding the leash overhead like a trophy.

"Don't slam the door," Marion warned, but of course the screen door was already shutting with a bang.

Coswell took the items and opened the front door of the car, kneeling on the vinyl seat. The dog leaned forward, forepaws resting on the seat's back. The sheriff slipped the collar around the neck and tightened it. The Lab was slightly larger than Butch had been, and the metal tongue had to take the notch before the worn one, providing a slack fit. Coswell made a mental note to drill a new hole between those two as soon as he could find the time. Meanwhile, since the animal was to be confined to the house and yard, there was little risk of the collar's getting snagged on a root.

The dog seemed content with the ornamentation, apparently aware that it was about to be let out of the car. Coswell clipped on the leash. Danny opened the rear door at his father's nod, accepted the leash's free end as the dog bounded out. After a few good sniffs and pettings were exchanged, the pair were inseparable.

"What should I call him?" Danny pondered aloud, nuzzling the ebony head against his chest.

Coswell's grin tightened. "I found him in a gully," he drawled. "You could call him Gully."

"How about Black, for his coat?" Marion quickly suggested.

Danny's face grew serious as only a ten-year-old's can. "I don't know. I'll have to think about it."

"That's a good idea, son."

Danny rubbed the Lab's brow studiously. "Gully's O.K. for now. Until I think of something better."

"Fine. Now, why don't you take Gully out back, where the yard is fenced in, and let him run free? We don't want him to get lost."

"He won't run away. I can tell." Nonetheless, Danny led Gully behind the house. The leash was hardly needed.

Marion took her husband's hand, affectionately rubbing a familiar, calloused knuckle. "He hasn't been that excited in weeks. I didn't realize how much he missed Butch." Her lips brushed his cheek. "I almost forgive you for surprising me."

Coswell squeezed her hand. "I'm glad he's taken to the animal." His mouth became a thin line. "But that's not the only reason I brought him home. I'd hoped, after the last couple of murders, that the killer had gone away. Apparently, as I feared, he hasn't. He was lying low, the way he



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did after the first batch. You're isolated here, Marion. The nearest neighbors are the Barleys, a quarter mile down the road. Gully knows the killer and has little reason to be fond of him. I hope he'll help us identify him. Meanwhile, he'll be a good watchdog, better than most because he knows what, or whom, to watch for. I want you to let him sleep in the house."

"The garage was good enough for Butch."

"I'd feel better if Gully is where he can help, in case someone breaks in."

"Does that mean you're going to be out all night again? Dan, you've *got* to sleep sometime!"

"I'll sleep on the office cot. Honest. Will you let Gully sleep in the house?"

"If he behaves."

Coswell nodded, satisfied. "He will. You saw how he took to the collar. He's well trained." He paused, fumbling at the handle of the patrol car door with his free hand, loathe to let go of Marion. "Can I drop you anywhere? Shopping?"

She shook her head. "I went with Janet this morning. Stocked up for three days. The garage said they'll have your transmission fixed by Thursday."

"About time."

"Dan? Take care of yourself?"

"You take care of yourself, and Danny." He kissed her quickly, yanked open the door, and slid behind the steering wheel.

Through the rearview mirror, he could see her watching until he made the turn at the end of the lane.

Lucas Abbot was a short, heavyset man, perspiring freely from a thick bush of gray hair. Neither his goatee nor his moustache was evenly trimmed. He was flipping through an almanac taken from the small bookcase opposite the sheriff's desk when Coswell entered the cramped office. Their eyes met. Coswell grunted a welcome and turned on the window air-conditioner. "Getting hot outside," he explained.

"Sid told me I could wait in here," said Abbot, inclining his head at the closed door, beyond which lay the anteroom. There, Sid Elliot, young, eager, and Lansdale's only paid deputy, held sway.

"You don't need Sid's permission, Luke. You know that."

Abbot half-smiled. "It doesn't hurt me, and it makes him feel good."

Coswell grunted again, adjusted the cushion on his chair, and sat. On the desk in front of him, neatly stapled, lay the reason for Abbot's visit. As Lansdale's longest resident practitioner, he'd naturally been appointed coroner. Until recently his duties in that capacity had been light, rarely requiring more than a signature on a death certificate. That morning, however, he had performed an autopsy on the locality's fifth victim of brutal murder in the past three months. He wanted to hand Coswell the prelimi-



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nary report in person, as usual. He also suspected Coswell was weary of seeing him so often lately.

"The facts are all there, Dan," he said as the sheriff lifted the report. "Johanna used a fresh ribbon, even, so it would be easy to read. Now I want to put that poor lad out of my mind until the final lab reports come back on the samples I sent to Giveny." Giveny was the nearest town large enough to support a decently equipped forensic laboratory.

Dan turned the pages, not seeing the words. He stopped to brush a fly from his nose. The flies seemed thicker around Lansdale this summer. Maybe they knew.

"I'm as bitterly tired of these senseless deaths as you, Luke. This isn't my favorite reading matter. Yet I'll have it memorized before the week is out. Right now I can't seem to focus my eyes. I'd be obliged if you could give me an oral summary."

Abbot slapped the almanac down on Coswell's desk and leaned back in the creaking, straight-backed visitor's chair, rubbing his nose. "Obviously death was caused by a head blow, but I can't tell you how many times he was hit or which blow was the fatal one. I hope he didn't linger. Hair and blood from the post seem to match the victim's."

Coswell dropped the report on the desk. "Nothing new, then. Do you know who the boy is?"

Abbot shook his head. "No one that age has been reported missing yet, according to Sid. At least, not in this county. Could be a runaway from almost anywhere. Naturally I took a set of fingerprints. The dental work will take some reconstructing, and then I can't promise accuracy."

Coswell shrugged in irritation. "I don't suppose there's any hurry. He'll be as dead with a name as without."

"There's one thing that might interest you, Dan. The lad didn't go without a struggle. There were fresh splinters in his palm. He wrestled for that post. Maybe he hit the killer."

Coswell leaned across the desk, eyes glittering. "Then there should be foreign traces on the post."

"It's only a possibility. I didn't find any, but my setup isn't sophisticated enough for a hair-splitting analysis. I hope that Giveny will tell us more."

"They have to!" Coswell pressed thick fists onto the desk and pulled himself erect. "Five murders in three months. Hell, before this started, Lansdale hadn't seen a homicide in fifteen years!"

Abbot reached across the desk, ostensibly to reassure the sheriff with a sympathetic grip, but actually to feel Dan's racing pulse. His last medical checkup, which of course Abbot had given him, had shown Coswell to be in fair shape ... for a man his age.

"You can't be sure it's the same man," the doctor said to distract his patient. "You've only a couple of vague eyewitness reports, and the sali-



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va blood-typing results have been contradictory. His method varies: knives, axes, bare hands...."

Coswell pulled away and moved to his office window, glaring down Lansdale's Main Street. "Of course it's one man, Luke. The mindless savagery; that's the connection. Come here, Luke. Look. There's Grace Belton, with her Tommy in tow. That's not right. A boy that age should be out playing in the middle of summer, not tagging after his mother on her shopping rounds."

Luke stood beside the sheriff, barely glancing out the window, discomforted by the chill air from the air-conditioner occupying its bottom third. "He's a good boy."

"Yes. And even if he were the devil incarnate, she'd be afraid to let him out of her sight." Coswell allowed the doctor to lead him back to his chair as he spoke. "It's the same all over town. Stores closing early. Telephone lines busy, neighbors calling neighbors to tell each other they've survived another night ... and sometimes getting no answer. I've seen what fear can do to people, Luke. When I was Danny's age, during the Depression, we lived less than a mile from the Kingsbury Run railroad gorge in Cleveland. Headless bodies appeared in that gorge periodically for three years. My mother kept me on a short leash until the war came along with horrors she could understand."

"Dan...."

"They never caught that killer, Luke, in spite of similar slayings in other cities at other times. For all I know, that butcher is still being used as a bogeyman in Cleveland's slums."

"Dan, sit back. Please."

Coswell obeyed, smiling wanly. "I've told you that story how many times now?"

"It doesn't matter."

"That's what happens when you get old. You repeat yourself."

Abbot returned to his own chair and fixed Coswell in his gaze. "Did you call the FBI again?"

Coswell grimaced. "Every other day, it seems."

"And?"

"Same thing. They'll send a man as soon as they can spare one. One man. Lansdale doesn't generate the publicity they can get from a big city such as Atlanta." He closed his eyes and sighed.

The silence thickened, disturbed only by the rattle of the air-conditioner. It bothered Abbot.

"Did Danny like the dog? Sid mentioned it."

"Hm? Oh, they got on great. Yes."

"I ask because your finding the animal reminded me of the Wilson deaths."

Coswell drew a sharp breath. "That was a bad one. Mother and daughter in the same room...."

"I didn't bring it up to dwell on the horror. The neighbor who'd entered the house and found the bodies also mentioned having seen an animal trot-



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ting away from the Wilson farm just after sunrise. About the size of a wolf ... or a large dog."

"This isn't wolf country," Coswell said. Then, letting the last sentence sink in: "Are you saying that this is the same dog?"

"Of course not. The neighbor didn't say he'd seen a large dog, only what looked like one, from a distance, in uncertain light. Earlier he'd also noticed a full moon that night."

"So?"

Abbot indicated the almanac. "There was a full moon last night, Dan, or so nearly full the difference hardly matters. If you backtrack for those bodies discovered days later, you'll find that these killings are grouped over three consecutive nights each month. I was checking the dates when you came in."

Coswell scowled. "You're going to tell me there was a full moon every night one of these murders was committed. Damn it, Luke, I'm in no mood for games. Claiming that Lansdale has its own Larry Talbot running loose isn't going to solve these crimes."

"Maybe. I'm not suggesting that you stock up on silver bullets, Dan, but it could be that the killer *believes* himself to be a werewolf. The eighteenth century madman Jean Grenier often raced about his cell on all fours, looking remarkably canine, under the same delusion. I'd wager our man's been heavily influenced by horror films. The fullness of the moon plays very little part in traditional werewolf legends."

Coswell blinked. "All these years, Luke, you've never mentioned an interest in folklore."

"Every good doctor has a few psychology books on his shelves. Can I help it if I'm human enough to remember the more lurid aberrations?"

"Assuming you're right, can we use that information to trap him?"

"I don't see how, until you get some suspects. It's only conjecture."

Coswell scratched his chin stubble, retrieved the preliminary autopsy report, and began reading carefully. Halfway down the first page he realized that Abbot was watching him closely.

"Sorry, Luke. I forgot you were there. You've given me something to think about. I'll call you if I need anything else."

"What you need," said the doctor, rising, "is about twenty hours of sleep. Your eyes are falling out of your head."

Coswell jerked a thumb at the cot set up along one wall. "I'll lie down in a few minutes."

Abbot snorted at the lie and left. A moment later, Coswell called to Sid Elliot.

Lanky Sid had more ambition and perseverance than intelligence, but those qualities made him useful as an assistant. Sid was willing to accept the relatively low pay of a full-time deputy because he hoped one day to fill Cos-



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well's shoes. That saddened the sheriff. Even with Coswell's recommendation, which he could not honestly give, the young man stood no chance of being elected. Lansdale wanted a man in that office with judgment the town could rely on.

"I have Luke's preliminary on the John Doe that Dick and I found this morning," Coswell began.

"Figured as much," Sid replied cheerily. "I made up a new folder. Want me to file it?"

Dan politely withdrew the report from his deputy's outstretched hand. "Not yet, but you could bring that folder. Also the files on the other four deaths. I'm interested in the witness interviews after the fact."

"Not many say anything much. Should I weed them out?"

"No. I want to see everything."

Sid smiled, nodded, returned to the anteroom. The file cabinet was near Coswell's door. The sheriff watched his deputy pull the files one at a time and form a neat stack.

Coswell lowered his eyes, returning in earnest to the report. The weariness had drained from his eyes. The only common thread, he'd thought, was the slayer's brutality. Murders occurred indoors and out, by a variety of means; victims' ages ranged from seven to sixty-eight, and the sexes were fairly evenly split. Nothing there. Now Lucas Abbot had spotted a pattern that Coswell had been too close to see. The volunteers would never have noticed it, since they weren't involved in all the cases, and none at all in the first two. No one expected blinding insight from Sid. But *he* should have seen it. He was in a better position to do so than Luke, even. It might be irrelevant. Or it might help illuminate other, more subtle threads in this design of death plaguing Lansdale. The sheriff was willing to snatch at anything that could lead to the madman, or even indicate where he was likely to strike tonight.

Coswell already knew *when* he would strike, if Abbot's theory was valid.

There would be another full moon tonight.

He woke in near-darkness. Light from outside filtered dimly through the slats of the blinds, striping his body with its fluorescence. He lay on his back, hearing himself breathe, as consciousness trickled back.

He didn't remember lying down on the cot, only rereading the files as he made scratchy notes. Probably he had fallen asleep over his desk and been carried. He must have been exhausted, to sleep through that.

The metal rim of the cot was cool under his palm as he pulled himself to a sitting position. Something crinkled. He fingered his shirt front, found a scrap of paper protruding from a pocket.

Just like Sid, Coswell thought, to leave a note and then turn off the lights



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so he couldn't read it. Coswell tugged at his shirt to peel it loose where sweat had plastered the fabric to his skin. The air-conditioner had also been switched off. He peered around the murky office, located his desk, stood up and shuffled forward. The bright glare of the desk lamp blinded him momentarily.

The note added little to what Coswell had already guessed. Sid hadn't the heart to wake him, decided to take tonight's patrol with Dick Grier — and, because the county would not authorize overtime, he'd take an extra vacation day later that year. Sid would not admit, even to himself, how much he welcomed the opportunity to occasionally handle things on his own. Coswell sighed. All that zeal, expended so futilely. Sid was in for quite a letdown someday.

The files were gone from his desk. Sid was too damned efficient when it came to routine. The deputy would have filed Coswell's notes, too, worse luck. He remembered being on the verge of a discovery before his fatigued body betrayed his mind.

Coswell flipped on the lights in the anteroom and started to open the file cabinet when he noticed a single sheet of yellow paper in the wire basket on Sid's desk. He grabbed it, studied his own handwriting. Sid hadn't known where to file this. The scribblings were disjointed, a word here, a phrase there, but they served to revive Coswell's train of thought.

He paled beneath his tan.

The murderer had been definitely seen three times, always in shadow and from a distance. The descriptions were consistently vague: probably male, over six feet, thick torso, shaggy hair. The hair could be a wig, the size an illusion of clothing. Once he'd been silhouetted against the full moon, so any supposed lycanthropy was undoubtedly in the killer's mind. As if Coswell needed further proof of insanity!

Roughly half the murders had taken place in or near the victims' homes, and the killer had been rational enough to take elementary precautions such as ripping out the telephone. Mrs. Wilson had been strangled by a phone cord. Coswell now cursed himself for making an unwarranted assumption: that the killer got in the same way he got out.

He could have been let inside by an accomplice.

There were more indications of large animals than Abbot had recalled, sometimes only a strange dropping or set of pawprints; irrelevant for the individual investigation, but the combination formed a block of ice in the pit of his stomach. Coswell had an idea that was almost as bizarre as Abbot's theory. Almost.

He punched out his number at home on Sid's telephone. After an interminable wait, he heard ringing on the line. Three rings. Four. Come on, Marion.

Click. Buzz. The voice was flat, a



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stranger's. "The number you have dialed is temporarily out of serv—"

Coswell hung up on the recording. It could be a normal breakdown, but the coincidence was too much. More likely the line had been cut.

Or chewed through.

His slick palms skidded on the edge of Sid's desk as he steadied himself. The killer was sick, capable of perverting everything he touched. Even the loyalty of man's best friend. Who would suspect a harmless stray, eager and friendly and willing to attach itself to the first human who showed the slightest kindness? So well trained, too. Yes. And weren't Labs often bred and trained as hunting dogs? Stalkers. flushing the quarry.

And Coswell had practically ordered his wife to keep Gully inside the house!

Coswell heard blood rushing past his ears, felt the heart pounding against the chest wall. Abbot had warned him about his blood pressure, that it could lead to something more serious. But not now, not tonight. It couldn't happen tonight.

He returned to his office, buckled on the holster and revolver Sid had thoughtfully removed, checked that the gun's chambers were loaded, tossed a box of cartridges into his pocket. With sausagelike fingers, he dialed the number of the mobile telephone in the patrol car. They used to have a radio, but with his small staff Coswell usually had no one to man the office transmitter, which fell into disrepair.

While the connection was going through, Coswell grabbed the almanac and looked up that night's time for moonrise. Then he checked his watch.

Fifteen minutes. Just enough time to drive home, if the killer stuck to Abbot's script.

A busy signal pierced his ear. Coswell disconnected, stated to redial, paused. What would he tell Sid and Grier? Very little. If he were wrong, if the idea had been conjured out of too many sleepless night, at worst he'd look foolish. Certainly the phone's being out of order was justification for concern.

But he could waste precious minutes trying to reach Sid by telephone, and if the patrol car was on the other side of Lansdale they'd never arrrive in time.

Coswell dropped the receiver and hurried outside, leaving lights ablaze. He stopped running at the edge of the small lot behind the building. There was only Sid's compact. Dick Grier lived near enough to walk, and Coswell's station wagon was still being repaired. Cursing, Coswell raced back inside, searched Sid's desk for what seemed like hours but actually was less than a minute.

The deputy had taken his car keys with him.

Coswell grabbed a paper clip and pair of pliers. A moment later he knelt by the compact. Hot-wiring cars had been Lansdale's most common crime



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before the killer came, and the sheriff had learned a few things about technique. Sid hadn't locked the door, fortunately, saving Coswell the trouble of picking the lock. He pocketed the paper clip. Thirty seconds under the dashboard with the pliers and a flashlight from Sid's glove compartment brought the motor to life. A stray spark tickled Coswell's damp fingers.

He slipped behind the steering wheel and left a healthy amount of rubber as he turned onto Main Street. The town's streets were deserted at this hour, luckily, for he did not slow at crossroads. On more than one curve a rear wheel bounced on the curb, until he was outside the town proper and sidewalks were nonexistent.

From time to time he took one hand from the wheel to wipe his brow and glance at his watch. The second hand seemed to be spinning.

With a quarter of a mile to go, the compact coughed to a stop.

Sid hadn't filled his tank.

Frustrated, Coswell banged his fist on the dash. Pain shot through his knuckles. His breathing grew ragged; the curse in his throat couldn't reach his lips. Coswell threw open the door and ran. Twenty yards to his left was the Barley house, its windows dark. He considered stopping to wake Ed Barley, have him call the patrol car, but there wasn't enough time. Sid would never reach Coswell's house before the sheriff did. He'd call after he got his wife and son to safety.

If he did.

The road was hard-packed, its veneer of dust reflecting a fortnight's lack of rain, but Coswell felt he was racing through quicksand. Clutches of trees at the edges of low-cut farmlands shadowed the unlit road. He thought he saw a flash of light, turned hopefully, but no car headlights trailed him. The jarring of his body was sending photons through his brain. Thereafter he ignored the illusion, as he ignored the almost deafening sound of his heartbeat. It couldn't fail now. A dead man couldn't save his family.

At last the gravel of his driveway scraped his soles. He grasped for and leaned heavily on his rural mailbox, sucking in great quantities of night air. His shirt was sodden and clammy; he could smell the fear oozing from his pores. The house was dark, save for a night-light in the kitchen. He looked at his watch, reading it clearly in the moonlight.

The moon!

He staggered forward, drawing his revolver, heading for the kitchen door, the obvious point of entry. The screen door's mesh had been slashed. The inside door stood wide open. He plunged in, refusing to consider the possibility that he might be too late. He couldn't be. He *couldn't*.

"Marion!" Idiot, he thought, now the killer knows you're here. No, it's all right. It might scare him off.

Or it might make him hurry the job.



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In the night-light's yellow glow, Coswell saw Butch's woven bed, dragged from the garage by Marion to accommodate Gully. The cushion had a dark stain. The odor assured him it was not blood. Gully had urinated, that was all.

And the killer had stepped in it, for the wet print of an unshod human foot discolored the carpet at the foot of the stairs leading to the bedrooms.

"Danny! Marion! Are you all right?"

No reply.

He took the steps two and three at a time, relying on the banister alone to keep from falling. He stumbled over something at the top of the stairs, smacked his free hand along the wall to maintain his balance. He turned, gun ready, snapping on the hall light to see what he'd tripped over.

It was small and white, with fingers.

"Nooo!" Coswell screamed.

He screamed again at the heavy blow from behind, just above the kidneys. His finger tightened involuntarily on the revolver's trigger, wasting a bullet. He spun to face his assailant, and the blade ripped free of his flesh. Hot blood soaked his shirt and pants.

The killer stood before him, grinning with broken teeth. He was a huge man, his naked body abnormally hairy but not so much that up close he'd be mistaken for an animal. His mouth was clotted with fresh blood, his penis half-erect, his mahogany eyes gleaming.

Coswell fired again, but horror, exhaustion, and his own mortal wound spoiled his aim. The slug only plowed a furrow along the madman's ribs. The killer slapped the gun from Coswell's grip and stabbed the sheriff again, nostrils flaring as he twisted Marion Coswell's wickedly sharp bread knife, a blade keen enough to cut through screen door mesh.

The sheriff gurgled. Crimson stained his chin, dribbled onto his chest. He scrabbled at the killer's hirsute torso, wanting to shred his murderer's face, rip out an eye, leave some mark on this monster. His fingers grazed a leather strip obscured by the matted, shoulder-length hair.

Coswell acted instinctively. His right hand clutched and twisted; all his fading strength and will went into holding on. He fixed his gaze on that awful, feral face.

The broken-toothed grin widened, just for a moment; the killer lusted for these final, desparate seconds of his victims' lives. Then, for a longer moment, it froze. Finally, though the jaw still gaped, no trace of smirk remained. Even the overlarge pupils lost some of their brilliance.

The killer let go of the knife, freeing both hands to tear at what was choking him. Coswell gasped as the blade, hanging from his abdomen, slowly pulled loose to clatter on the hardwood floor. He stifled the impulse to try stanching his own wounds. He considered himself a dead man anyway; if



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this last act of his life failed, he did not want to live.

A swollen, purplish tongue oozed past the killer's jagged teeth; hot, fetid breath seemed to sear Coswell's blanching cheeks. Razor-like fingernails clawed deep, drawing fresh blood from his right forearm. Coswell shut his tearing eyes tightly. Neck veins bulged, nostrils flared, sweat dripped from his face and mingled with the blood plastering his shirt to his chest.

The killer sank to his knees, dragging Coswell down after him. Off balance, the sheriff tilted sideways. They lay facing each other in the gore-splattered hall.

Still Coswell did not loose his grip.

Ten minutes passed, each an eternity, before Coswell realized that it was over. The fitful gulping for air which filled his ears came from his throat alone.

He forced his eyelids open. The killer's muscular chest was still; Coswell felt no rise and fall where his arm lay on the breastbone. Blood on the lips looked black against the blue background.

His fingers stayed locked in what he knew would be his deathgrip, and he now had his first clear glimpse of what he'd used to strangle the madman. It was also his final glimpse.

The collar fit just as loosely as when he'd placed it around Gully's neck, less than twelve hours earlier.

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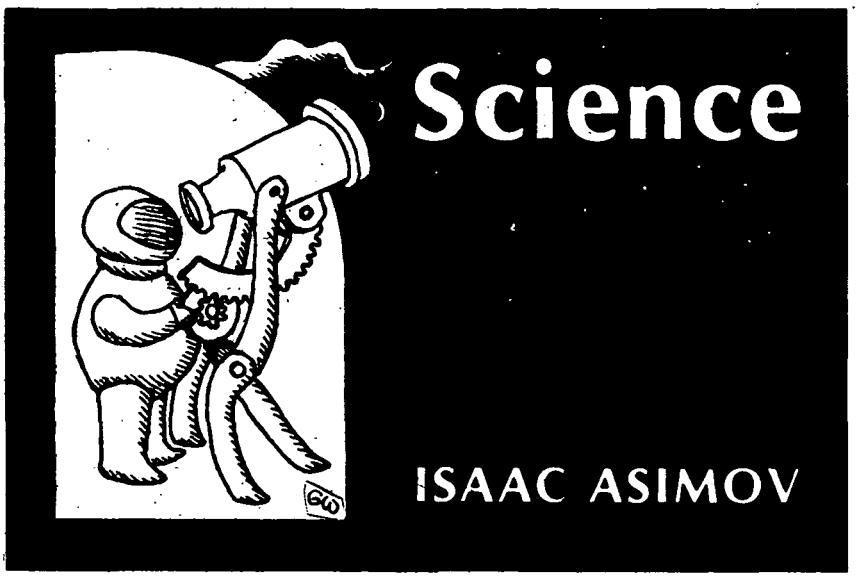


## ARM OF THE GIANT

In addition to being a prolific writer, I'm a prolific speaker, averaging very nearly a speech a week these days. One difference in my two careers, however, is that whereas there are professional literary critics, there are no professional oratory critics.

Believe me, I don't complain about this lack. I share with all other writers I know (living and dead) a low opinion of professional critics, and I ask for no new variety of the species. As far as my speeches are concerned, I am delighted to accept the applause and ovations at face value; I am pleased to have people come to say pleasant things; and (best indication of all) I am gratified to have the person who persuaded me to come hand over the check with a big grin on his or her face.

I don't need the addition of someone making a living out of explaining where I fell short. And yet something of the sort sometimes shows up unexpectedly. (Or, as some unsung philosopher once said, "You can't win them all.")

I was asked to give an evening talk a few weeks ago to a convention of the American Psychiatric Association. When I asked what on Earth I could



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tell a couple of thousand psychiatrists considering that I knew nothing about psychiatry, I was told, expansively, "Anything you wish."

So I talked about robots and their effect on society and what the future of robotics might hold for us. I introduced the subject by telling them in humorous detail how I came to write my robot stories and recited the Three Laws of Robotics and was, as I usually am, very self-assured and unhumble.

The talk gave every sign of being a huge success and I was pleased. My dear wife, Janet, however, (who is herself a psychiatrist) had taken a seat in the very last row in order to be less conspicuous, and she now seemed a bit depressed. I could see that, so I asked about it and she explained.

After I had been speaking for a while (Janet told me) a woman seated near her began talking loudly to her neighbor. Janet attracted her attention and asked her very politely to keep her voice down.

At which the woman said, with contempt, "Why? Don't tell me you find him interesting? It's nothing but narcissistic nonsense."

Naturally, I laughed and told Janet to forget it. I have never expected to please everyone.

Then, too, I don't know if the woman was herself a psychiatrist or had just wandered in off the street, but she was certainly not using "narcissistic" in its psychiatric sense. She used it in its casual, everyday meaning of "abnormally interested in one's self to the disregard of others" and to grasp the fact that I am narcissistic in that sense is no great discovery.

In fact, just about everyone is narcissistic in that sense, usually with far less excuse than I can manufacture. For instance, my critic was being rather nastily narcissistic by deliberately expressing her displeasure at me in a way that would disturb others who might, conceivably, have been interested in my talk.

We don't even have to confine ourselves to individuals. The human species as a whole is unbelievably narcissistic and, by and large, considers itself to be the whole reason for the existence of the Universe. Their interest in anything else at all is confined almost entirely to objects that impinge upon them and in direct proportion to the extent of that impingement.

For instance, it is estimated that there are $10^{22}$ stars in the known Universe, and yet humanity generally fixes its attention on just *one* of them (the Sun) to the nearly total exclusion of the others, just because it happens to be the closest to ourselves.

Just to show you what I mean, we will all agree at once that the Sun is the star which is by far the largest in apparent size. After all, it is the only



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star that appears in the form of a disc rather than a mere point of light. Very well, then, but which is the *second* largest star in apparent size? How many people know? Or care?

To discourage narcissism, therefore, I will now take up the question of the second largest star in apparent size.

The constellation of Orion is generally considered the most beautiful in our northern sky because it is so large, so interesting in shape, and so rich in bright stars. The name of the constellation dates back to the Greeks who had a number of myths about a giant hunter named Orion. He was loved by Artemis, the goddess of the hunt, but she was maneuvered into killing him by her brother, Apollo. In sorrow and contrition, she translated him into the sky as the constellation.

The giant hunter in the sky is usually pictured as holding a shield in his left arm to ward off the charge of Taurus (the Bull), while his right arm holds his club up high, ready to bring it down upon the furious animal. A bright star marks each of these arms. Further down, a bright star marks each of his legs. Between the two is a horizontal line of three bright stars which marks out his waist (Orion's belt).

The brightest of the stars in Orion is one that is distinctly red in color and that shines in his right arm. Its astronomical name is Alpha Orionis.

In the early Middle Ages, the triumphant Arabs took over Greek science, including the Greek picture of the heavens, and they, too, saw the constellation of Orion in the form of a giant hunter. The Arabs had the sensible habit of naming stars from their position in a constellation, so they named Alpha Orionis, "yad al-yawza," meaning "arm of the giant." For some reason, some European translater of an Arabic text transliterated the Arabic symbols as "bayt al-yawza" ("house of the giant," which makes no sense) and spelled it, in Latin letters, as "Betelgeuse" — which remains its name to this day.

In my youth, I was under the impression it was a French word, and I tried to pronounce it as such. I had nothing but contempt for anyone so illiterate as to pronounce it as though it were spelled "beetle-juice." Imagine my embarrassment, then, when I found that the dictionary pronunciation of the star is indeed quite close to beetle-juice, and you might as well say that.

Well, as it happens, Betelgeuse is better known in detail than any star but our Sun.

Why?



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Consider that (all other things being equal) a nearby star is more likely to be understood in some detail than a distant one is — just as the Moon was known in surface detail long before Mars was.

Then again (all other things being equal) a large star is more likely to be understood in some detail than a small one is — just as Jupiter's surface was known in more detail, until recently, than the much smaller, though nearer, Phobos, was.

If we want to know the details of some star other than our Sun, we would do well, then, to choose one that is both large and nearby.

Betelgeuse is not a star that is really nearby; there may be as many as 2,500,000 stars that are closer to us. Still, considering that there may be as many as 300,000,000,000 stars in the Galaxy, there are 120,000 times as many stars in our Galaxy that are farther than Betelgeuse, than there are stars that are nearer. We can therefore fairly say that Betelgeuse is in our stellar neighborhood.

On the other hand, we can also conclude that Betelgeuse is unusually large, just by looking at it with the unaided eye. This may seem strange since all the stars look like mere points of light, not only to the unaided eye but even through the largest telescope. How, then, can we so easily tell that one point of light is larger than another point just by looking at it without instruments.

The answer is that red stars are red because their surfaces are relatively cool. Because those surfaces are cool, they have to be dim per unit area. If red stars are nevertheless very bright, that must be because they are unusually close to us, or, if that is not so, because the total surface is unusually large.

Thus, the star, Alpha Centauri C (Proxima Centauri) is closer to us than any other star in the sky, but that is insufficiently close even so, for it remains invisible to the unaided eye. It is red and cool, and small in addition, you see. Betelgeuse is as red as Alpha Centauri C, and it is 150 times as far away from us as Alpha Centauri C is, but Betelgeuse is not only visible to the unaided eye, it is among the dozen brightest stars in the sky. It must, therefore, be deduced as having an enormous surface from that fact alone.

So must have reasoned the German-born American physicist Albert Abraham Michelson (1852-1931). In 1881, Michelson had invented the "interferometer," which could measure, very delicately, the way in which two beams of light would interfere with each other, the light waves of one cancelling those of the other in some places and reinforcing them in others (depending on whether one wave went up while the other went down, or both went up



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and down together). The result was a kind of striped, light-and-dark alternation, and from the width of the stripes much could be deduced.

If a star, as seen by us in the sky, was a true point, with zero diameter, all the light would come in a single ray and there would be no interference whatever. If a star, however, had a finite diameter (however small), the light from one side of the star and the light from the other side would be two separate rays that would converge toward the point of observation forming a very tiny angle. The two separate rays would interfere with each other, but would do so extremely slightly and the interference would be very difficult to detect. Naturally, the larger the star, the larger the angle (though it would still be tiny) and the better the chance of detecting interference.

Michelson used a special interferometer, six metres long, that was capable of detecting particularly tiny effects. He also made use of the then new 2.5 metre (100 inch) telescope, the largest in the world. In 1920, the apparent diameter of Betelgeuse was measured. It was the first star shown by actual measurement to be more than a point of light, and the news made the front page of the *New York Times*. The apparent diameter of Betelgeuse turned out to be about 0.02 seconds of arc.

How wide is that? If you imagine 100,000 shining dots like Betelgeuse, side by side and touching, you would have a thin, bright line with a length equal to the width of the full Moon, when it is nearest Earth. If you imagine 65,000,000 dots like Betelgeuse, side by side and touching, you would have a thin bright line circling the sky like a gleaming equator.

What's more if you imagine a great many shining dots, each the apparent size of Betelgeuse and imagined them packed tightly together over the sphere of the sky, it would take about 1 1/3 quadrillion of them (1,330,000,000,000,000) to convert the sky into a solid red blaze.

When you think of that and realize that, in actual fact, the sky is spangled with only 6,000 visible stars, you will realize how empty the sky actually is, even allowing for the Sun, Moon, and six visible planets.

Betelgeuse is a variable star; that is, its brightness varies with time. What's more, there is no simple periodicity to the variation so it is an "irregular variable." Its average brightness is of magnitude 0.85, but it brightens to 0.4 at times and sinks down to 1.3 at others.

The reason for this variability is not mysterious. The mere fact that a star is a red giant means that it is in its final stage as an extended star. Before long, it will no longer be able to support the mass of its outer layers by the energy of fusion reactions deep within itself, and the star will then



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collapse (with or without an explosion). The fact that Betelgeuse is flickering, so to speak, is another indication that it is close to the end. The flicker is probably due to tiny abortive collapses, at which time compression manages to squeeze a little more fusion out of the central regions, and this serves to expand the star again.

If that is so, then there should be noticeable changes in the diameter of Betelgeuse as measured by interferometer, and there are. The apparent diameter varies from 0.016 to 0.023 seconds of arc.

In order to tell how large Betelgeuse actually is, in absolute units, from its apparent size, you must know its distance, and that's not easy. Stellar distances that are greater than 30 parsecs (100 light-years) or so, are difficult to determine.

The latest (and presumably most nearly reliable figure) I have been able to find for the distance of Betelgeuse is 200 parsecs (650 light-years).

For the sphere of a star to appear to be 0.02 seconds of arc in diameter even though it is at a distance of 200 parsecs, it ought to have a real diameter of about 1,200,000,000 kilometres (if my calculations are correct). Betelgeuse has a diameter then that is, on the average, 860 times the diameter of the Sun. Its volume would then be 640,000,000 times that of our Sun, which means that, if Betelgeuse were imagined as a hollow sphere, you could drop 640,000,000 spheres the size of the Sun into it before the large sphere was filled (assuming the small spheres were packed tightly together so that there was no space between them).

If you imagined Betelgeuse in the place of our Sun, its surface would be located well out in the asteroid belt. Earth's position would be one quarter of the way from Betelgeuse's center to its surface.

We can now get a more dramatic picture of its pulsations. When Betelgeuse expands to its maximum, its diameter would increase to about 1,450,000,000 kilometres, or just about 1,000 times that of the Sun. At its minimum, it would be a mere 1,000,000,000 kilometres, or 715 times that of the Sun.

At full expansion, the surface of Betelgeuse, if it were imagined in the place of our Sun, would be nearly at the orbit of Jupiter. It is three times as voluminous at maximum as at minimum. If it is pictured as breathing hard because it is near the end of its race as an extended star, it is breathing *very* hard.

Granted that Betelgeuse is a giant star in reality (it belongs, in fact, to a class we call "red giant"), how does it compare in *apparent* size with other



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stars that may be smaller — but closer, too.

For instance, I have already said that Alpha Centauri C is the star closest to ourselves. It is part of a group of three stars, the largest of which is Alpha Centauri A. Alpha Centauri A is almost exactly the size of our Sun, and at its distance of 1.35 parsecs (1/150 that of Betelgeuse) its apparent diameter would be only about 0.0035 seconds of arc, less than 1/5 that of Betelgeuse. For all Alpha Centauri A is so close, its puny size cannot show up as large as distant, giant Betelgeuse.

Sirius is larger than Alpha Centauri A, but it is also farther, and its apparent diameter would be only about 0.0032 seconds of arc. Arcturus is 32,000,000 kilometres in diameter (23 times that of the Sun), but it is 11 parsecs away and its apparent diameter is 0.0095 seconds of arc; while Aldebaran is 50,000,000 kilometres in diameter (36 times that of the Sun) but is 16 parsecs away, so that its apparent diameter is 0.011, just about half that of Betelgeuse.

There just isn't any star that is sufficiently large or sufficiently close (or both) to rival Betelgeuse. The one that comes closest is another red giant, Antares, in the constellation of Scorpio. It is at a distance of 130 parsecs, so that it is closer than Betelgeuse, but it is slightly dimmer than Betelgeuse even so, despite the advantage of nearness, and it must therefore be appreciably smaller.

As it happens, Antares, at its distance, would have an apparent diameter of 0.002 seconds of arc, which is equal to the average value for Betelgeuse, but Antares does not pulsate appreciably. It is therefore smaller in apparent size than Betelgeuse is at maximum.

In short, of all the stars, Betelgeuse is second to the Sun in apparent size.

Betelgeuse has a surface temperature of 3200° K. as compared to our Sun's surface temperature of 7500° K. Betelgeuse is red hot, while our Sun is white hot.

If the Sun's surface temperature were suddenly to shrink to 3200° K., then, aside from the fact that its light would redden, it would deliver a total illumination only about 1/43 as intense as it does now.

Betelgeuse has 740,000 times as much surface as the Sun has, however, so that even though each Sun-sized portion delivers only 1/43 the illumination of our Sun, the entire star blazes with a light 17,000 times that of the Sun.

Astronomers make use of the term "absolute magnitude" to represent the brightness a star would display if it were exactly 10 parsecs from Earth.



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If we were to view our Sun from a distance of 10 parsecs, it would have an absolute magnitude of 4.7, which would make it a rather dim and unspectacular star.

Betelgeuse, on the other hand, if moved up to a distance of 10 parsecs from us, would blaze with an absolute magnitude of -5.9. It would shine ruddily with a brightness 4 1/3 times that of Venus at its brightest.

It would then have an apparent diameter of 0.4 seconds of arc, which would be enormous for a star (other than our Sun), but it would still appear to be merely a point of light. After all, the planet Jupiter has an apparent diameter of 3,000 seconds of arc, and still looks like a mere point of light to the unaided eye.

Despite the enormous size and brilliance of Betelgeuse, in some ways it is not quite the giant it appears. What about its mass, for instance, the quantity of matter it contains?

It is more massive than the Sun certainly, but not enormously more massive. In fact, it is estimated that it is 16 times as massive as the Sun. *Only* 16 times.

This mass of 16 Suns is spread out over a volume that is, on the average, 640,000,000 times that of the Sun. The average density of Betelgeuse must therefore be 16/640,000,000 or 1/40,000,000 that of the Sun.

This is smaller than you might expect, for it amounts to about 1/35,000 of the density of the air you are now breathing. When Betelgeuse is at its fullest expansion, the quantity of matter it contains is stretched over an even larger volume, and its average density is then 1/55,000 that of air.

If we were to suck out all but 1/35,000 of the air in some container, we would be justified in speaking of the results as a vacuum. It wouldn't be an absolute vacuum, or even a very hard one, but it would be vacuum enough for the practical every-day sense of the word. It would be rather natural, then, to view Betelgeuse (or any red giant) as a kind of red-hot vacuum.

Still, Betelgeuse (or any star) is not evenly dense all the way through. A star is least dense at its surface, and that density rises, more or less steadily, as one penetrates below that surface and is highest (of course) at the center. The temperature also rises to a peak at the center.

A star begins as a ball of hydrogen, chiefly, and it is at the center, where the temperature and density are highest, that nuclei smash together hard enough to fuse. It is at the center then that hydrogen is fused to helium and energy is developed. The helium accumulates, forming a helium core that grows steadily as fusion continues.



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Hydrogen fusion continues to take place just outside the helium core where the hydrogen is at the highest temperature and density; and the helium core, as it grows, becomes hotter and denser itself. Eventually, after millions, or even billions of years, the temperature and density in the helium core become great enough to force even the stable helium nuclei to fuse further into carbon and oxygen nuclei. (Carbon nuclei are composed of three helium nuclei, oxygen nuclei of four.)

The new surge of heat developed by the onset of the helium fusion causes the star (which, all during hydrogen fusion, has remained relatively unchanged in appearance) to expand so that the surface cools. The star, in other words, which has been until then a white hot, relatively small object, suddenly expands into a red giant as a new core of carbon and oxygen forms and grows at the center.

That, then, is the situation with Betelgeuse. At its center is a carbon-oxygen core that is at a temperature of 100,000,000° K. (as compared with 15,000,000° K. at the center of the Sun). This is still not hot enough to cause the carbon and oxygen to fuse to more complicated nuclei still.

This core (as best astronomers can tell from computer calculations based on what they know of nuclear-reaction theory) is perhaps twice the diameter of the Earth and has a density something like 50,000 grams per cubic centimetre, or more than 2,000 times that of platinum on Earth. Betelgeuse is certainly not a "red-hot vacuum" all the way through.

Perhaps 1/50 of the total mass of Betelgeuse is packed into that small core. Around the core is a helium shell perhaps ten times the volume of the core that holds another 1/50 of the total mass. And outside the helium shell are the rarefied outer regions that are still hydrogen to a larger extent. Helium continues to fuse at the surface of the carbon-oxygen core, and hydrogen continues to fuse at the boundary of the helium shell.

Hydrogen at the bottom of the rather rare hydrogenous outer region of Betelgeuse cannot fuse at the enormous speed with which it would have fused at the center. Helium, fusing under denser and hotter conditions, produces much less energy per nucleus. The two fusions together can barely produce enough heat, therefore, to keep Betelgeuse in its state of enormous distention. Every once in a while, there is a short-fall, apparently, and the star starts to contract. The contraction compresses the hydrogen and helium and speeds the fusion, so that the star expands again.

As time goes by, further fusion reactions take place at the core, each one producing less energy per nucleus than the one before, so that the situation gets steadily worse. Eventually, when iron nuclei form at the core,



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there is no way for any further energy-producing fusion to take place there, and periodic contractions become more and more extreme. Finally, there is one last failure and the star collapses altogether and permanently.

The sudden collapse will compress what fusible material still remains, and much of it will go off all at once to produce an explosion. The more massive the star, the more sudden the collapse, and the more catastrophic the explosion.

A star the size of the Sun will collapse and fizzle, blowing a small portion of its outermost layer into space. This will form a spherical shell of gas about the collapsed star. Seen from afar, the shell will look like a smoke ring, and the result is a "planetary nebula." The collapsed star at the center will be very small and dense — a white dwarf (see HOW LITTLE? September 1979).

A star considerably larger than the Sun — like Betelgeuse — will explode violently enough to be a supernova. The compressed remnant will collapse beyond the white-dwarf stage and will become a neutron star or even, perhaps, a black hole.

This is undoubtedly the fate to be expected of Betelgeuse in the comparatively near future, but to an astronomer, the "near future" could mean 100,000 years, so don't wait up nights for it. There is at least one other star that seems likely to beat Betelgeuse to the punch (see READY AND WAITING, February 1983) and even there, it may be a few thousand years before it explodes.

Even barring a supernova, however, there is more of interest to say about Betelgeuse, and I will continue the discussion next month.

## ABOUT THE COVER

Terraformed Mars (from ATLAS OF THE SOLAR SYSTEM by David A. Hardy (World's Work 1982). The view is from a future base on Phobos; on the right is the mass-driver which was used to propel dark material from Phobos onto the Martian poles, causing them to absorb more infra-red radiation and releasing the locked-up water, starting a new atmospheric cycle.



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*Here is the second in Ian Watson's Book of the River series about two very different societies split by a mighty and mysterious river.*

# *New Year's Eve At Tambimatu*

**BY**
**IAN WATSON**

*When Yaleen is 17, she joins the guild whose boats ply the 700-league shoreline of a huge river. No one can cross this river because of the "black current," which blocks the midstream, and also destroys any men who attempt the river more than once. Yaleen's brother Capsi runs away from their home town, Pecawar, north to join the Observers in Verrino who spy on the unknown west back through telescopes. When Yaleen and Capsi meet up a year later in Verrino, he reveals that women in the west are harshly oppressed. With Yaleen's aid, and wearing a diving suit to avoid the midstream current, Capsi crosses over, is caught and burnt alive — witnessed by Yaleen and the Observers. Grieving, Yaleen returns to Pecawar to find her middle-aged parents expecting a new baby. Unable to tell them of Capsi's death, she signs on to sail south. The nature of the black current, and of the river-shunning society in the west, remain a frightening mystery.*

Was I glad when the *Spry Goose* got to Jangali! Boatmistress Marcialla was actually going to allow her crew a few days' holiday. Imagine that. A rest.

Of course, nothing is ever as simple as it seems. By the time we were to resume our voyage again, a few score hours later, I would feel distinctly relieved to be back on board. When we arrived on that sultry Tenthmonth afternoon, however, I didn't know this. A somewhat weary Yaleen was just looking forward innocently to the Junglejack Festival.

The problem with the *Spry Goose* wasn't that Marcialla was a martinet, a disciplinarian. Nor her boatswain, Credence, either. It was simply that Marcialla was boat-proud; and the



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*Spry Goose* being a three-mast schooner, there was quite a lot of boat to be proud of. So when we picked up a load of paint at Guineamoy, and Marcialla had said casually, "Let's give the *Goose* a lick of paint," I didn't know what we were in for.

I soon found that painting isn't a matter of slapping on a fresh coat then sitting back to admire it. First there's the rubbing down of the old paint, often to the wood. Next, any knots in the exposed timber have to be sealed with knotting juice, and any cracks filled with resin gum. After that there's priming, and then there's undercoating ... and a long, long time later you actually get to doing the painting itself — twice over.

The less said the better, I think, about all the laborious hours that I and several others spent while we sailed south with the autumn winds behind us! Three times over we plied from Guineamoy to Spanglestream and back again. Then from Spanglestream to Croaker's Bayou four times there and back. Rubbing, knotting, priming, painting. And on each of the return trips, as we tacked against the prevailing wind, I had rope and canvas to occupy my idle hands. I think Marcialla deliberately timetabled the loading and delivery of cargoes just so as to build in optimum drying times.

Yet at least this kept my body and mind occupied. Thus, it was *almost* "innocently" that I arrived eventually in Jangali, anticipating a little holiday.

* * *

Innocent, though, I was not. Not deep in my heart. For had I not helped my own brother to go to a horrible death on the far side of the river, where they burn women alive? Had I not watched through a telescope, while they burned him, too?

And I had not dared tell my mother or my father, rationalizing this failure of courage on my part as a responsible decision — since anguish at the news of Capsi's fate might make my mother miscarry. (Though what she imagined she was up to by having another baby was beyond my comprehension!)

All the labor of painting seemed to have laid a coat of paint over these scars in my soul. Yet it hadn't really done so. I hadn't knotted and gummed and primed those scars. When the paint dried, they would soon show through again as dark shadows. The fresh skin of paint would crack and peel.

Also, while busy painting — and reefing and luffing, belaying and shinning up rigging — I had kept my eyes fixed on the tasks in hand. Even so, the black current was always out there. No amount of paint, no spread of sails was going to hide it or erase it.

Was it really a living creature six hundred leagues long or more? A powerful, sensitive yet generally comatose being, which for its own purposes allowed women to ply the river, but not men? Was it some kind of alien goddess? Or was it, as old Yosef had implied, something artificially created



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to separate us from the "Sons of Adam" on the west bank, that mysterious brotherhood of men who turned their backs superstitiously and savagely upon the river; about whom almost all we knew was the little that Capsi had been able to heliograph back before they caught him?

I had drunk of the current, and it knew me; but it I did not know.

Maybe it was impossible ever to know what the black current really was. In which case how much more sensible it was to ignore it, and get on with painting a boat, and enjoy the journey as much as possible.

And really — hard labor and scars of the heart apart — there were so many new sights for me to soak in. Even when seen twice and thrice over they still remained quite exciting, by and large.

South of Gangee, that scruffy town I'd visited on my first voyage aboard the *Sally Argent*, was Gate of the South.

The tropics put in their first hesitant appearance there — with the townsfolk doing their best to encourage the show. Butterblooms cascaded from balconies, and biscus trees were kept well watered by a network of tiny cobbled streams, although the red trumpet flowers were smaller than those I was to see farther south.

Just as my own hometown of Pecawar made a virtue of being on the verge of the desert, so did Gate of the South rejoice in its own position — more so than some towns of the deep south that were tropical through and through. At Gate of the South it was still possible to "garden" the vegetation. There was even a ceremonial stone arch that spanned the road from north to south, with a signpost by it listing all distances to farthest Tambimatu 280 leagues away. What practical use this was, I couldn't say, except perhaps as a disincentive to the local men to set out on foot! My new friend, Jambi, with whom I went ashore for a few hours, was a six-year veteran of these southern reaches, and she pointed out in high amusement that no road actually ran all the way from Gate of the South to Tambimatu. The swamps around Croakers' Bayou were obstacle number one. Farther south than that, the jungle increasingly had its own way with roads.

Jambi was dark-skinned and jolly, with long black hair that she generally wore in a bun so as not to get tangled, thus hoisting her up the mainmast inadvertently. She hailed from Spanglestream, and the only time I was to mention the black current to her she merely glanced and wrinkled up her nose, and that was the whole of her interest in it. This made me suppose that she was rather a good choice as a friend. She wouldn't remind me of anything painful. Jambi had a shorehusband and a baby boy at Spanglestream, though she didn't seem to



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bother about them unduly, except to the extent that she stayed in southern waters.

After leaving Gate of the South, we called at Guineamoy — source of that wretched load of paint. At Guineamoy you could also have gardened the tropics. But people didn't bother, perhaps because Gate of the South had stolen their thunder. Guineamoy preferred to wear an ugly face and hide everything in grime. The people seemed to make a virtue of this, as though foul air and the stink of chemicals were their way of dealing with the burgeoning extravagance of nature. Smoke and steam belched out of lots of little workshops. There were kilns and smelters and smithies. There were warehouses and rubbish dumps; and outside of the town, half a league inland, was an artificial lake of filth. Inland, yes. Whatever stenches they pumped into the air, obviously they had no desire to risk polluting the river itself. If they had, I suppose the river guild might have banned their cargoes. What the black current itself would have done about such pollution, if anything, I had no idea. Just then, I didn't wish to wonder.

I suppose grim is comparative. If Guineamoy seemed a filthy place to me, maybe to its inhabitants it seemed a paragon of virtue and energy, and everywhere else excessively rustic. Maybe I was unduly sensitive to it, like a green leaf vulnerable to blight — because I was already a little blighted in my soul.

After Guineamoy came Spanglestream, which was famous for its tasty fish and its dozens of lug-sailed fishing smacks decorated with painted eyes on hulls and sails. It was equally famous for the phosphorescent streamers that snaked across the river at night in bright silver, transforming the river into one of stars. These streamers occurred for only a couple of leagues to the north and south of the town, and looked like bubbly exhalations of breath from the midstream current. I suppose they must have been made up of myriads of tiny organisms that fed on minerals or whatever was abundant in the water there — providing in their turn a nonstop meal for the shoals of larger fish.

I stayed overnight at Jambi's house. Her husband I found obliging and amiable. Obviously he adored Jambi — which relieved her of the need to adore him unduly in return. But otherwise he was just a little bit of a zero. I foresaw trouble if Jambi ever had to quit the river; and I could only wonder quite how she had put up with being beached during the course of her pregnancy. I played with their little boy, too. Alas, this reminded me of the infant stranger my own mother was cooking up. ...

Jambi, husband, and myself visited a raw fish restaurant that evening, where we filled ourselves with thin slices of madder-colored hoke and yellow pollfish and velvety ajil dipped in mild mustard sauce. And we drank



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ginger spirit. Afterward we strolled down to the promenade to view the spangling phosphorescence, which put on a particularly fine display for my benefit; which was the only time that I mentioned the current to Jambi.

"Maybe," said I, "all the tiny silver things feed on something the black current jettisons here? A sort of excrement from it?" I'd asked earlier, and it turned out that no one really knew. The glassmaker's art, à la Verrino, had never produced any lenses powerful enough to plumb the really microscopic.

That was when she glanced, and wrinkled up her nose. Perhaps this wasn't surprising — in view of the fact that she had just treated me to wonderful fish. Here was I suggesting that the black current used the neighborhood as a toilet! This may have seemed an unholy slur on her native town.

More likely my remark seemed like tipsy nonsense. Jambi was a bustling, practical person who probably dismissed her own guild initiation quite soon after it occurred as merely a metaphysical masquerade — as something mystical, in which she had no interest.

As soon as I asked her this, to my alarm I felt a queasiness in my guts. Was this because of the presence of a male, her husband? Pleasantly fired by all the ginger spirit, I might have been on the verge of saying too much. Remembering how sick I had been when I was indiscreet about a guild secret that one time on board the *Sally Argent*, I promptly shut up and enjoyed the silvery show.

Jambi couldn't have minded my comment, since she invited me back to her home on our subsequent calls at Spanglestream during the next few weeks. I accepted her invitation the second time. That night she was throwing a party for some local fisherwomen she had been at school with — at Spanglestream the call of the river did not necessarily call you very far from home. Yet on the third occasion I made an excuse. These invitations, kind as they were, reminded me of how I myself had invited a friend, Hali, home to Pecawar, only to discover that Brother Capsi had decamped. To his doom. And then there was the presence of the little boy. The child seemed, by proxy, to dispossess me of all possible homes except those afloat.

After Spanglestream we came to Croaker's Bayou, where the river spilled slackly inland into a maze of hot, dank swamps. Here stilt-trees meandered in long winding colonnades, forming vaults and corridors and tunnels. Mudbanks emerged and submerged at whim. Puffballs and great white fungus domes studded the exposed mud. The big froggy croakers squatted and hopped and played their ventriloquists' tricks, voices echoing off the water and the arched tree trunks.

And I thought fancifully that if the anus of the black current was located off Spanglestream, then here at Croak-



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er's Bayou was the moldy decaying appendix of the river. The grating croaks were a sort of flatulence, a shifting of gases in the bowels.

Once out of Croaker's Bayou, forests cloaked the shore. The western bank, far away, was likewise a ribbon of green. It occurred to me that the Sons of Adam might not rule the roost everywhere along the far side. How could they, when they denied themselves the advantages of river transport? Maybe *their* southern reaches were uninhabited. Or perhaps those who dwelled there were savages, without even the dubious level of culture of the Sons.

Savages! Ah, yet gentler perhaps than the Sons in their treatment of women. ...

And maybe they were even worse than the Sons. I spotted no canoes, no smoke plumes from campfires near the shore. If anyone lived over there, they, too, shunned the river.

But this was the least of my worries, compared with the unending paint job. Whenever it rained — which it did with a vengeance now and then — we had to rig tarpaulins.

Gradually the forest knotted and tangled itself with vines and mossmats, epiphytes and parasites, moving toward true jungle. Which, by the time we reached Jangali, it was.

We carried two young lovers as passengers on our journey to Jangali: Lalo and Kish. Kish was a boy from Spanglestream who was a friend of Jambi's family on her mother's side. Lalo had decided that she loved him and was now escorting him back home to Jangali, on the one river trip of his life to wed him.

It struck me as a slight shame that Kish's horizons should thus be limited to the small stretch of land between two nearly adjacent towns. Well, granted that Spanglestream and Jangali were eighty leagues apart! But a riverwoman usually thinks big, and I imagined in a rather snobbish way that it was a teeny bit unenterprising of Lalo to seek her husband from a town that was comparatively close to home, rather than from far Sarjoy (say) or Melonby.

We were chatting belowdecks one day, the four of us, getting better acquainted. Lalo was holding hands with Kish, while I was trying to pumice some paint off my fingers.

Like Jambi, Lalo was dark-skinned, though her hair was short and curly. She had an unusually loud voice and always spoke with particular emphasis. At one point she happened to mention that some trees deep in the Jangali jungles were "quite as high as the Spire at Verrino." She just mentioned this in passing, but so assertively did she voice it that I almost tore a nail off on the pumice stone.

"Ouch!" That Spire, and its observatory, were all too fresh in my memory.



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"Oh, so you got as far as Verrino?" asked Jambi innocently. This was indeed a singularly innocent question coming from a riverwoman, since there are half a dozen major towns farther north than that. But Jambi, as I say, was a devoted Southerner.

"Why, yes," said Lalo. "I didn't waste my time. I just didn't find anybody suitable. Not till Spanglestream on the way back." And she squeezed Kish's hand affectionately.

"It's often that way." Jambi sounded smug.

I couldn't help wondering whether Lalo had not been growing anxious by the time she got as close to home as Spanglestream. But maybe she had been especially choosy on her travels; which meant that she had made a sensible choice. The marriage would last, and last well.

I guess from Kish's point of view there was a whole world of difference between Spanglestream and Jangali. Judging from his questions, it was plain that Kish was a little apprehensive at the prospect of becoming a junglejack — if indeed he *would* become one. Lalo teased him with this prospect intermittently. Just about as often, she corrected his misapprehensions. ...

"It seems to me," said I — and I suppose I spoke thoughtlessly in the circumstances — "that a woman could find her ideal partner in almost any town chosen at random. It's a bit of an accident, isn't it? I mean, which street you happen to walk down. Which winehouse you pop into. Who you sit next to at a concert. You turn left here, rather than right, and it's this fellow who'll spend the rest of his life with you, while another fellow walks on by. It could so easily have been the other one instead."

"Oh, no!" Lalo protested. "A feeling guides you. A kind of extra sense that you use only once. You *know* you should turn left instead of right. You *know* you ought to carry on to the next town, because the scent's gone dead in this one. You're operating by a sort of special instinct during your wander-months. Honestly, Yaleen, you'll know this if it happens to you. It's a heightened, thrilling feeling."

"You're a romantic," said Jambi. "Kish is lucky. I tend to agree with Yaleen myself. Anyone can settle down with anyone else." (That wasn't quite what I'd said.) "But then," she added, "I also have the river as my first love."

And lovers in different ports as well, I wondered? Jambi hadn't spoken of this to me. One didn't gossip about one's harmless amorous adventures. For one thing, it would be demeaning to the men.

"So you turned right instead of left," said I, "but guided by your nose."

"And now I'll be a junglejack forever." Kish grinned ruefully. He had a whimsical, expressive face, with twinkling blue eyes, and I already wished that I myself had met him — the way



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that I had first met Hasso in Verrino, before I found out why Hasso had been hoping to meet somebody like me. ...

"Phooey!" said Lalo. "A junglejack? Why, that's nothing. I tell you, in the jungle you're usually better off *up* a tree. It's the creepy-crawlies down below that bug us. You'll need some good strong boots. And a stomach to go with them." She couldn't keep a straight face, though. She giggled. "Oh, I'm just kidding. Jangali's a decent, civilized place. Not like Port Barbra. That's where the really weird and queasy things happen, out in the interior. The fungus cult, for instance. Completely wrecks your sense of time and decency. Us, we just get smashed on junglejack like decent mortals."

"Tell me more," said Kish. "I like getting smashed, too. Preferably not by falling off a tree."

"You wouldn't, not with safety lines."

So we began to natter on about junglejack, the drink. Apparently this was distilled from the berries of some high vine. It went off quite quickly and didn't travel — alas for the export economy of Jangali, perhaps fortunately for the economy of everywhere else. And we nattered about junglejacks in general: the people who felled the hardwood trees and also harvested the tangled heights, picking fruit, tapping juice, scrapping resin, collecting medicinal parasite plants.

I became quite enthused about the impending festival, of acrobatics, vine-swinging, and skywalking; and also about getting smashed on junglejack, the drink.

As did Kish; which of course was why Lalo had timed her return for that particular week, to coincide. After a while she even had to remind him gently that not *everyone* in Jangali was a junglejack. There were also butchers and bakers and furniture makers, just like anywhere else.

And she went on more emotionally, now, about the beauties of the jungle, brushing aside the creepy-crawlies as of little consequence.

How I wish she had dampened my enthusiasm about Jangali rather than igniting it! Little did I know then that excess of enthusiasm would result in my saving Marcialla's life — bringing me in turn a singularly horrible reward.

Saving Marcialla's life? Well, maybe I exaggerate. Let's change that to: rescuing her from an awkward and potentially lethal situation.

I was looking forward to arriving at Jangali — which was so decently distant from Verrino. I was looking forward to really enjoying the events. I even imagined that I was, in a sense, successfully running away. All the while in truth I was running — or sailing — *toward*.

"Sun's shining! Paint detail on deck!" came Credence's call from the top of the companionway. Why I had bothered cleaning my fingers, good-



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ness knows. Except that if I hadn't, it would have been harder later on. Perhaps there's a moral in this: it's almost always harder later on. Everything is.

Jangali rejoiced in massive stone quays fronting the river, quarried and cut with steps and timber-slides. The town itself was founded upon that same great slab of rock, which ran back into the jungle before dipping under, submerging itself in humus and vegetation. In the original old town the architecture was of stone, with wooden upper stories. The new town behind — which I was to see presently — was wholly of timber, and fused with the jungle itself. Some houses there incorporated living trees. Others were built onto them and around them. Some even slung from them cantilever-style. The entire effect of Jangali was of some strange metamorphosing creature that was living wood at one end and fossil rock at the other — or perhaps of dead rock coming gradually to life the farther inland you went.

The locals reminded me of those of Verrino. Indeed, this might have been why Lalo had followed her nose to Verrino in the first place — though with no result. Jangali folk weren't as quicksilver-nimble and chattery, always scurrying every which where. Yet there was an elastic spring to their steps, a bounciness, as if they regarded the stone floor of the town more as a trampoline, ever about to toss them up into the treetops beyond. Its inert rigidity amused them and made them prance, just as a riverwoman sometimes feels about dry land after a long time afloat; they intended never to let themselves be bruised by it.

As I say, the locals weren't chattery. But they did address one another in tones pitched to carry through tangles of vegetation in competition with other chatterers of the beast variety; in voices intended to penetrate up to the very roof of the jungle. Conversations generally took place a few paces farther apart than they did elsewhere, much more noisily, more publicly. Jangali would have been the ideal place for a deaf person to take up residence.

Thus, the locals reinforced their sense of community. Otherwise, once you were in the jungle, the jungle could swallow you up, stifle you, isolate you, make you mute. I gathered from loud-voiced Lalo that people around Port Barbra behaved more furtively.

Before Lalo and Kish disembarked, they invited Jambi and me to visit them at her parents' home. Or more truthfully, Kish expressed this desire, so that Jambi (old family friend) could see him in his new abode; Lalo invited Jambi and included me in the invitation, too. I suppose Kish was trying to keep a kind of psychological lifeline open to Spanglestream. No doubt he hoped that Jambi would continue to pay the occasional visit whenever she was in Jangali. Personally, I didn't think this was entirely wise — not at



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this early stage in their relationship. For "a man shall leave his mother and father, and sister and brother, and embrace the family of his wife." That's what it says in *The Book of the River.* In at the deep end, say I! Just so long as there aren't stingers in the water (or at least in the hope that there aren't).

Yet, maybe Kish was right. This established him from the start, in a strange town, as on an equal footing with his wife.

At any rate, it was their own business, and I soon abandoned any minor scruples I might have felt about us getting in the way when I learned that Lalo's parents lived in the new town, in a hanging home high up a tree. This I had to see.

And that's what we set out to do, the very next day. But before that, an odd thing happened.

We'd arrived in Jangali in midafternoon. There was the furling of the sails to see to, and the gangers to supervise as they unloaded our cargo: crans of fish from Spanglestream, barrels of salt transshipped all the way from Umdala, and pickles from Croaker's Bayou and such. By the time everything was boatshape, we had time only to go ashore for a brisk walk round the monumental old town, culminating in a not-so-brief visit to Jambi's favorite bar — where I made my first acquaintance with the fiery junglejack.

The bar in question — the whole town, for that matter — was abuzz in expectation of the festival. The normal population must have increased by half again, what with people trekking in from up-country and from smaller jungle settlements along the shore, not to mention outside visitors. Lalo pointed out women from Croakers' Bayou, and from Port Barbra. The former she identified by a more sallow look to them, and the latter by the hooded cloaks and scarves they wore — to cope, Jambi said, with occasional pesky clouds of insects in their area; besides, Port Barbrans spoke much more softly. By contrast, the Jangali locals seemed even noisier that I supposed they usually were. The Jingle-Jangle Bar lived up to its name; and I ended up later on with quite a headache — quite independent, of course, of the junglejack spirit.

The motif of the Jingle-Jangle wasn't trees, but carved stone. The bar was an artificial cavern of nooks and crannies and stalagmitic columns, with fat chunky nude statues holding oil lamps. Around their squat necks hung strings of medallions, and around their loins brief girdles of the same. Presumably these medallions would jingle and jangle if you shook them. To my mind the whole mood of the bar was primitive and subterranean, with a hint of secrets and conspiracy, an odor of dark mystery.

The place was also very hot. There we were in the reeking petrified bowels of a jungle so dense that it had become



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a cave. I must say that the place had atmosphere: compounded of perfume and oil fumes, sweat and mustiness, and partly of sheer hot air from all the babbling voices. I wouldn't have been surprised if savage drums had begun to beat; I noticed that there was a stone dais for entertainers, currently unoccupied.

And in the Jingle-Jangle I happened to notice Marcialla and Credence sitting over a drink. This wasn't in itself unusual. What was odd was that they seemed to be arguing. Credence was insisting on something; Marcialla kept on shaking her head.

Every so often Credence glanced in the direction of a small, hooded group of women from Port Barbra; and Marcialla particularly shook her head then.

I should explain that Marcialla was quite a short woman, though in no way squat even if she must have been in her early fifties. She was wiry, and carried no spare flesh. Credence was big and busty and blonde, and at least fifteen years her junior. Marcialla wore her graying hair swept back in short shingled waves; Credence had hers in chopped-off pigtails. All in all, Credence looked like an inflated, coarsened girl.

"I'm peckish. Let's have a bite to eat," I suggested. So we carried our drinks over to the buffet bar — this was supported by carved stone female dwarfs, pygmy caryatids holding up the food table. On Jambi's say-so we bought spiced snakemeat rolls.

On the way back I ducked into an empty nook just round the corner from our boatmistress and her boatswain. This was just on impulse. Besides, our previous seats had already been taken in our absence.

I admit that I was curious, and a little tipsy, therefore bold. But with all the racket going on around us I didn't really expect to hear anything. However, there must have been something of a whispering gallery effect in that nook. Also, the din was so incoherent that paradoxically this made it easier rather than harder to pick out snatches of two familiar voices — the way that a mother can hear her own particular offspring cry out amidst fifty other bawling babies.

Snatches were all that I did hear, but they were interesting enough.

"But suppose you doped the black current with enough of the time-drug. ..." That was Credence.

A mumble from Marcialla.

"... slow down its response, wouldn't it?"

"That fungus is a poison of the mind. ..."

"... test it by mixing some in a phial of the current ..."

"... and who'll drink it? You?"

"... might do."

"... to prove what?"

" ... achieve more *rapport*, Marcialla! Sometimes to be able to speak to it, and it to us. Maybe our time scales are too different."

"... contradicting yourself. Slow *it*



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down? Slow us down, you mean. Anyway, it reacts fast enough when it's rejecting someone."

"Reflexes and thoughts are two different things. If I stuck my hand in a fire. ..."

"Your trouble is, you're a true believer. Like your mother; and so she named you Credence. You believe in the godly spirit of the river. ..." A surge in the level of the din cut off the rest of this.

"Besides," was the next thing I heard, from Marcialla, "take this notion one stage further. It's all very well to talk blithely of doping one phial with this wretched fungus powder. But suppose somebody then thought of dumping a few barrels of the stuff into the midstream, eh? Slow down its, ah, reflexes long enough to take a boat through, perhaps? Over to the other side. ... Where does that lead to in the long run? I'll tell you where: it leads to poisoning the current. It leads to making the river safe for men. What price your goddess, then? The whole thing falls apart. A whole, good way of life goes with it. Always assuming that the black current didn't react horrendously to being poisoned! What you're saying is sheer madness."

"Sorry, *Guildmistress*," said Credence unctuously.

"You know those people, don't you?"

"Which people?"

"The Port Barbra ones over there. Do you think I'm blind? You've arranged something. Now you want a phial of the black current. Or is it a bucketful? They want it. In exchange. Do they appreciate the dangers? Any more of this, and we'll be having to have every boatmistress on the river keep the stuff under double lock. Don't you think that would be sad? Is there no trust? No sense anymore?"

Then the noise really did get out of hand. Some musicians had arrived, to do terrible things to my head — although they played pipes and flutes and banjos rather than bashing on drums. Jambi was growing restive about my noncommittal grunts of yes-no's as I sat with my head cocked, intent on other things.

"You in a trance or something?" she shouted.

"Hmm ...? No. Sorry! Cheers."

After a long lie-in the next morning, I was up and leaning against the rail at the head of the gangplank, waiting for Jambi to join me — when along came Marcialla.

"Yaleen," she said thoughtfully. "Saw you in the Jingle-Jangle last night." She waited for me to volunteer something.

"Quite a place," said I. "Oof. My head." I rubbed my tender skull.

"You meet all sorts in a place like that."

"All sorts are in town for the festival, I suppose."

"Even women from Port Barbra."

"Oh yes, Jambi pointed some out to



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me. They wear hood and scarves."

And so we continued to fence for a while (or at least that's what I thought), and I was feeling fairly pleased with myself, though also praying that Jambi would hurry along and break it up.

"Weird place, Port Barbra," said Marcialla. "Odd people there, some of them."

"So I've heard. Strange jungly rites."

"People sometimes get attracted by strange things." When I said nothing, Marcialla went on, "Of course, you can't judge a place by its oddballs. Its extremists. After all, look at Verrino."

*Did she know?* Had word got out of what I had done, and passed along the river? I was talking — I remembered — to a guildmistress, no less. I'd heard that much last night.

"And equally," she mused, "people can get mixed up in queer things quite innocently, even the best of them." My heart was thumping. But then, so was my head. That was when Marcialla glanced up at the rigging and furled sails, her boatswain's special province, and sighed; and I realized that she had been thinking all along in a sad and lonely way of Credence, and simply associated me with her because I, too, had been in the Jingle-Jangle.

"Maybe," I said — I was trying to be helpful, without at the same time betraying myself as an eavesdropper, "maybe people who believe deeply in things are all innocents, but it's a dangerous kind of innocence. ..." And maybe I said this only to impress, in the hope that Marcialla would be amazed at my youthful perspicacity. What I'd said certainly wasn't true of the observers at Verrino. Hasso hadn't been an innocent. On the contrary! Nor Yosef, either. Nor Capsi. Dedicated men, but by no means naive. If I had overheard that conversation aright the previous night, though, Credence was both dedicated *and* naive, deep down.

Marcialla obviously regarded me as the innocent, here. She smiled in a kindly way.

"You've done good painting work. Quite commendable. And if I hadn't kept you at it back then, there wouldn't have been time for a holiday now, would there? Don't let me keep you from enjoying yourself."

"I'm just waiting for Jambi." (Where was she, damn it?)

"Take care ashore." Marcialla added softly. More to herself than to me.

"Careful, Boatmistress?" And I realized that I was echoing Credence's suave tone of not so many hours earlier.

Marcialla stared at me, puzzled. "The booze, I mean, girl. Watch the booze; it's lethal." And she patted me on the arm.

"Don't I know it!"

Which was when Jambi turned up at long last.

So we sought out Lalo's home in the new town. We followed her directions



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scrupulously; but, as directions have a way of being, these were perfect so long as you had already been there once.

As we walked, the stone of the old town transmuted itself into the timber of the new. Homes were nuzzling against living trees, or were arranged around them in conical skirts so that the tree itself seemed like a huge, out-of-proportion chimney. Other houses climbed the largest giants in cantilevered or buttressed tiers — stepping around the great trunks like flights of steps by which some wood spirits could descend at night from the leafy crowns. Sometimes a walkway ran from one tree to the next, along a branch.

As yet, this was all jungle that had been thinned out and tamed. In the old town the sun was aggressively hot and glary; farther inland the unbroken umbrella of foliage would surely blank it off except for vagrant shafts like spears of molten metal. Here, then, in the new town, was the ideal compromise: the sunlight dappled down. Unfamiliar flower bushes hugged the roadways and paths, but there was no riot of undergrowth as such. Vegetable gardens were planted here and there, plump with tomatoes, courgettes, cucumbers, sweetgourds, meatmelons, pumpkins. Familiar fruits mostly, though their size was something else.

And of course we got lost. Or more exactly, we arrived just where we wanted to be — not that day, but a couple of days later — at the festival site. I suppose this was because quite a number of people involved in the preparations were heading that way, too. Like two stray fish caught up in a school of busier fish, unconsciously we went with them.

We came to a very large clearing, on one side of which workers were hammering, fixing and strengthening the terraces of a grandstand.

And at once I felt at home, for the area before the grandstand was like the deck of an enormous boat. Sparred masts soared up to the sky from the flat, stripped ground. Rope ladders ran up some of these, single knotted ropes up others. I spied trapezes, aerial platforms, and crow's nests — with more ropes stretched taut from each to the other; while behind this array stood a dead, though still mighty tree. All the minor and lower branches had been lopped, but the surviving high arms were hung with more acrobatic gear. A few junglejacks dressed in tough baggy trousers, scarlet jerkins, and flexible fork-toed boots hung from harnesses, checking belays and loops, wood-pitons and snaplinks; one man was abseiling down a rope.

After watching all this activity for a while, we made inquiries and were on our way again — this time in the right direction. My hangover had died away nicely by now.

As promised, the Lalo family home was a tree house — one of those that



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"stepped up" around a jungle giant. We reached it by way of a covered stairway bolted to the trunk that mounted the roofs of the house below.

Yet scarcely had we arrived at the door, let alone met any parents, than Lalo declared that a picnic was in order "out in the *real* jungle." Kish popped out in her wake, bearing a hamper, and within what seemed like seconds we were descending the stairs again.

Perhaps Lalo's parents had hinted strongly that it wasn't a good idea to invite a friend from Spanglestream so very soon after Kish had left the place. Next thing, all his female relatives and friends might be descending on Jangali, to snap the house right off its moorings!

Or maybe it was Lalo, restored to her home and habits after her long wander-months, who had decided of her own accord that she had committed a faux pas by casually inviting two boating acquaintances. Kish himself seemed perfectly happy and at ease.

Whatever the reason, off we went into the jungle along a trail of perhaps half a league, which grew increasingly wild and noisy with hidden wildlife.

A jungle seen from afar, from the deck of a boat, can be utterly monotonous. At close quarters the same jungle becomes magical. There seemed to be a hundred shades of green: a whole spectrum composed entirely of that color, as though the sun shed green light, not a bluish white. And in competition with this first, green spectrum was a second one consisting of flowers and flutterbyes radiating reds and oranges and azures, shocking pink and sapphire, like colored lamps, the better to be noticed. Wings and petals seemed crystalline, glassy, iridescent, with an inner light of their own.

"Why, the flowers are shining!" I exclaimed. "Aren't they? And that flutterby there!"

"They are — and you should see them after dusk," said Lalo.

Apparently when all the green leaves grew dim, there lingered for an hour or two a parade of floral and insect firelight.

Lalo pointed out the occasional dangerous spine-tree and a squat "boiler" out of which a burning liquid could gush, and oozing gum-sponges. She flushed out a whistle-snake, which would shriek to scare you if you trod on it; but it wasn't dangerous except perhaps to your eardrums. She sent a couple of land crabs scuttling. These could take your finger off, though only if you stuck it in the wrong place.

She named for us the mammoths of the jungle: the jacktrees, hogannies, and teakwoods. She showed us where honeygourds and blue-pears hung up high almost out of sight. We passed a miniature forest of white-antlered fungi crowding on a fallen, rotten trunk. These, she said, were edible; whereas the tiny crimson buttons sprouting beneath were instant poison; they looked it. I'm glad I paid at-



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tention. I little knew it at the time, but this guided tour was a lesson in survival that I would be very glad of during the early months of the next year...

Vines dangled down as if to loop and strangle you. Indeed there was only one variety known as stranglevine; but you had to allow it a good half hour to tie itself round you. Moss-mats hung in greenly dripping masses, as though secreting some slime-venom — yet, these could staunch blood and disinfect wounds. And webvines wove what looked suspiciously like enormous webs where surely something fat and hairy with lots of legs and eyes lurked; but didn't.

We finally came to Lalo's chosen picnic spot. Deep rock erupted upward here in the form of a ziggurat rising a hundred spans above the jungle floor. As we neared this stone mass, it took on the appearance of an abandoned, overgrown temple. Briefly I imagined that Lalo was about to reveal an ancient secret to us: the work of some long-dead race, dating from before human beings ever came to this world, from somewhere else.

But no; it was a natural formation. Crude steps, now mossed over, had been cut up one side of it; though perhaps the steps were natural, too, due to fracturing and crumbling. Up these we climbed to the top, which was flat and almost bald of vegetation except for a cushion of moss. Lalo uprooted a few plants and a shrub that had established themselves, and tossed them over the side — just as hill climbers elsewhere add an extra stone to a cairn. So, high above the jungle floor in this gap squeezed open by the ziggurat, we sat down. Kish unpacked a bottle of wine wrapped in wet leaves to keep it cool; and blue-pears, spiced rolls, smoked snake and a jar of pickled purple fungi.

We chatted idly, and ate and drank and admired the view, mainly of aerial webs and mats of moss — the brighter aspects of the jungle were below these middle levels, mostly. After a while I picked up the half-empty jar and peered at the remaining contents.

"I was meaning to ask you, Lalo. You were saying that people at Port Barbra use some fungus or other as a drug to mix their minds up."

Lalo laughed. "And here in Jangali we always poison visitors with purple mushrooms. To keep them in our thrall for a hundred years."

"No, seriously."

"Why?"

"No special reason. It just seems weird. Interesting, you know."

"And poor Jangali has nothing half as interesting to offer, alas."

"Oh, I didn't mean to imply ...! Why, this is fabulous." I swept my hand around. "I feel like a real junglejack perched up here."

Kish grinned. "I don't think junglejacks enjoy quite as much support as this."

I persisted. "What *is* the story?"



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Lalo considered, while she bit into a blue-pear.

"I don't know all that much about it. We hear bits of gossip now and then. About orgies in the interior. They use this fungus powder to make sex last a long time. To spin out the, um, sensations, so that they seem to last for hours and hours."

"So it's a drug that slows down time?"

"The trouble is, time gets its own back. So I've heard. You speed up afterward. You run all over the place like a loony. You talk too fast for anyone to understand you. You gobble down heaps of food because you're burning it all up. If you go on using the stuff, you age before your time. You're old at thirty. Worn out, I suppose."

This business about rushing round and chattering nineteen to the dozen didn't quite seem to square with what I'd heard of the "furtive" conduct of people in Port Barbra and environs. But maybe the members of the drug cult kept themselves apart in secret places while they were liable to race about and gabble on. In any case, this might just be a tall tale that the drug users fostered, to frighten people off.

"So it's mainly a sex thing with them? It's all just to make sex more thrilling?"

"I don't know that it makes it more thrilling," said Lalo. "It certainly makes it last longer."

In her emphatic voice, this sounded like some ultimate statement. Kish blinked several times and shook his head as though he hadn't heard correctly. Jambi convulsed with silent laughter.

Lalo pulled a doleful face. "Oh, dear! I think I said the wrong thing." And we all began to laugh; after which I couldn't reasonably get back to the topic without seeming obsessed. As if I wanted some of the fungus drug for myself.

Two days later Jambi and I were part of a huge crowd out at the festival ground. Lalo and Kish had promised to see us there, but of course we didn't meet up. There must have been ten thousand people. The grandstand was packed to bursting, and the sides of the clearing were thronged. Certainly there were more people than I had ever seen in one place before. It struck me immediately that anything could happen in that crowd while the acrobatics displays were in progress, and nobody would be any the wiser. Alas, despite the presence of at least a score of jungle-guild marshals patrolling and supposedly keeping an eye on things, I was right.

The clearing had been transfigured with banners and bunting, with bright little tents and stalls beneath awnings selling snacks and drinks. There were sideshows for children; giant flutterbyes in twig cages to be won; wrestlers, clowns, conjurors, even a fortune-teller.

A fortune-teller. I had never had



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my fortune told. The tent was decorated with golden stars and comets; and when we came upon it there was no one waiting outside.

"Shall we?"

"No thanks," said Jambi. A conjuror was tossing a stream of shiny silver balls nearby. By some sleight of hand he seemed to be making them travel in figure eights. "I'll watch him. You go ahead."

A fortune-teller. Would the person read my palm? Or slit open a fish and examine its guts for auspices? How ancient, how quaint.

Inside, the tent was dim. So until I was already inside and committed, I didn't realize that the fortune-teller was a Port Barbra woman. Her hood was pulled well over her head, and her scarf covered her nose and mouth so that of her face there were only two eyes staring out intently — observing the whole of me, while I saw precious little of her.

She spoke softly. "Please sit." On a stool, before a little table.

Which I did. By now I was wishing to flee from the tent, instead. But I was determined to be polite. Or was I too cowardly to rush out? Sometimes rudeness is the better part of courage...

However, I placed the coin of value stipulated on the notice outside, upon the table: fifty scales, or half a fin. Not much, though not entirely negligible.

Cards: it was cards. She was a cartomancer — though maybe she could also turn a trick with fish guts or palm lines. Cards were probably faster and took less power of invention.

She handed me a pack, facedown. "Don't look. Cut and shuffle three times. Each time you cut, turn half the pack around." I did so, and gave it back.

She fanned the pack on the table, still facedown. There must have been a hundred well-thumbed cards in all.

"Choose nine."

I did so, quite at random. I had no special interest for this one rather than that. She stacked the rest of the pack to one side and then began to turn up the cards I had selected.

The first showed waves on water, with a schooner riding in the distance. The picture was in sepia tones, and pink and dirty white — as were they all to be.

"This is the River. This is you." Her voice was a dull monotone. I nodded, though I shouldn't have done.

The second showed a spyglass. "This lies behind you. You are observant. You watch, though you don't always understand. But since this is behind you, you will understand more in the future."

The third was of a babe in arms, but it was facing away from me. "This is your family. Reversed, it suggests negative feelings. You sail on the river to escape this." ("Oh, no, I don't," said I to myself.) "Or perhaps," she added, "by sailing the river you create these negative feelings." Obviously I had



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given her some facial cue. I decided to keep my features frozen.

Next was a signal mirror, handheld against a backdrop of rolling clouds with the sun just breaking through. Again the card faced away from me.

"These are your hopes or fears. The light of illumination. If reversed, you fear a message. Or a message has filled you with fear. The clouds are your anxieties, which cloud insight."

She turned up the fifth card; and I saw a handome, laughing man, smartly attired. He reminded me of Hasso (of the dandyish flared trousers and striped shirts), though he was differently attired; but he was just as jaunty. Once again the card lay turned away.

"This is the influence at work: a husband to be sought, a lover. Yet he isn't really for you. Or else he is far away in time or space."

Number six was a cockerel crowing on a dunghill.

"Pride," she interpreted. "Indiscretion."

Indeed? Perhaps it made sense, at that!

Seven was a bonfire, with another cockerel rising in flames from it, flapping fiery wings. An arrow pierced the bird's chest. I had begun to sweat coldly, because this bonfire stirred hideous memories; but she said:

"This is the soul. Also, striving — which is betrayed or disappointed. Or else transfiguration, which pierces the heart. The meaning is ambiguous." The bonfire certainly wasn't! "That card shows the *potential* outcome."

Number eight: three men with staffs sprouting green leaves were fighting with three women similarly armed. A fourth man strode away from the fight, his staff over his shoulder supporting a bundle. A house blazed, behind.

"Conflict. A husband walking home. Warfare. Alternatively: resolute bravery, success. This is the *probable* outcome. Again, it's ambiguous."

She turned the last card over, placing it in the center of the cross-shape she had made with the others. I beheld a river with a black band snaking along it midway. Several fish gaped out of the water as though to gulp flies.

"The Black Current, what else? This crosses you, obstructs you. Or maybe ... *you* will cross *it*." Abruptly the fortune-teller reached out and grasped my wrist. "What do you know of any of this?" she whispered fiercely. Her grip was tight. Outside, drums were beating, and I thought that they were beating in my heart.

"Nothing! Let go of me!" With my free hand I quickly forced her fingers open. After months of working boats, this wasn't difficult. And this time I did flee, out through the flap of the tent.

"Hey," cried Jambi, who was hovering impatiently. "You're missing the show! It's started. Come on."

Those drums beat louder now, unmuffled by the canvas; and pipes were



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skirling. Jambi had no time to ask me how I had got on in the tent; neither then — nor later.

If you want to commit a crime, the best place to do so is in public: in a place so public that dozens of other distractions are on hand.

How Marcialla actually got into the predicament she did get into, I never saw. Nor did Jambi. If anyone else noticed they must have taken it entirely for granted as nothing unusual on festival day. When Jambi did spot what was going on, even she didn't at first register anything amiss. But she wasn't privy to the conversation I'd overheard in the Jingle-Jangle — nor had she heard Marcialla's veiled warning as we two chatted at the head of the gangplank.

It was a good three hours later. The main display was already over: the acrobatics, the climbing and abseiling, the ropewalking and trapezing by professional junglejacks, male and female, who had been practicing for a week and more. That evening would see a fireworks display upon the great masts — the fireworks imported, naturally, from smelly Guineamoy. But the period from now until dusk provided full opportunity for those who weren't part of the official performance to show off their antics. So when the last professional team had swung down sweating to the ground, a whistle blew. Teenagers, and men and women, too, swarmed across the field to the tall masts and began to scramble aloft. Some went high up, some not so high.

"Accidents? Of course there are accidents," Jambi was saying to me as we watched these novices displaying their skill, or lack of it. "Lalo says that someone broke his neck a couple of years back. There are always sprains and fractures."

"It seems silly."

"Isn't it better if it happens here than out in the deep jungle?"

"I don't follow you."

She gestured. "There's a first-aid tent. Bandages, bone-setters."

"Why should amateurs do it, at all?"

"Oh, Yaleen! If somebody takes a tumble here. obviously they aren't ever going to make it as a real junglejack. The guild won't accept them."

"Oh, I *see*. *We* don't need competitions in mast-climbing, to become riverwomen. We just do it."

"The river's softer than the ground."

'Decks aren't. And don't forget the stingers!"

"Well, that's how they do things here. See: the jungle-guild marshals are watching what goes on, but they won't interfere."

"It seems a bit barbaric." Was it any more of a peculiar ordeal than having to drink a slug of the black current? A slug that might drive you mad? Less, perhaps. Less.

We were debating the pros and



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cons over cups of cool blue perry that we'd bought from a nearby stall, when Jambi broke off. She squinted and shaded her eyes.

"Isn't that Marcialla up the tree?"

I stared across the clearing. Marcialla, indeed. High, high up, swinging freely to and fro on a trapeze. No safety nets of webvine were hung beneath.

"Why does she want to show off? Surely she isn't thinking of quitting the water for the woods at her age?"

Marcialla's posture was ... peculiar. The tiny distant figure sat immobile, with her fists clenched round the ropes. Her legs and her head weren't moving in proper time with the motion of the trapeze.

And when the trapeze finally swung to a standstill, Marcialla would be marooned high over a gulf of nothing.

At that moment I noticed three figures hastening through the crowd over to our left. They was heading in the direction of the old town. One was blonde and big and very familiar. The other two were hooded. I couldn't distinguish their Port Barbra features, but something about the way one of them moved and clutched briefly at Credence to say something convinced me that she was the fortune-teller. For all I knew she might have been in the Jingle-Jangle, too, a few night earlier! Then the crowd hid the trio.

In a flash I knew exactly what was going on. (Yes, indeed, the signal mirror had just flashed an urgent message in my mind!)

"Jambi, don't ask questions — it's too urgent. You must do this for me: run back to the docks as fast as you can. Round up any crew you see — and secure Marcialla's cabin! Whatever you do, don't let Credence into it. Particularly if she has any strangers with her. Women in hoods."

"Eh? But I can't forbid—"

"Trust me. Do it!" And I set off at a sprint across the clearing.

I climbed that dead tree by rope ladder, as far as a notch where the main trunk forked. Here was a platform from which Marcialla must have been launched, but this was no use to me at all; Marcialla was way out of reach by now. The trapeze came less close to its starting point on each return swing. At least Marcialla hadn't fallen yet; she still sat propped on her seat like a life-size doll.

A single knotted rope led higher up — thirty or forty spans higher — to where a lateral branch of considerable girth left the trunk. It was pointing in the right direction, but so many spans above. Craning my neck, I could see more rope lying on the branch, the coils bulging over like a nesting snake. One end appeared to be fastened by snaplink to a wood-piton driven deep into the trunk itself.

Quite how I managed the rest of the ascent I'll never know. It wasn't like climbing up a mast at all. For me there has always been a certain feeling of elasticity about climbing a mast. Be-



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cause a mast is rooted in a floating boat. There's a sense that your activities up a mast produce a certain slight reaction in the mast itself. No doubt this is perfectly illusory! Otherwise, boats would tip over as soon as a few women swarmed into the rigging. But this tree felt like rock, rooted in rock.

At last I reached the branch I was aiming for, and scrambled onto it, legs astride the waiting rope. I was relieved to see other pitons set at intervals along the branch; otherwise, I don't know how I could have tied the rope to it, given its girth. Unclipping the snaplink, I hoisted the coils over my head onto my shoulders. All coiled up, that rope was quite some weight.

Shuffling my thighs forward as fast as I dared, I soon arrived at a piton positioned above the midpoint of Marcialla's swing, and attached the snaplink again.

She was swaying to and fro only quite gently by now. The wooden bar of her seat was hardly a very substantial one; and I feared that she was in even more danger. While she had still been swinging fairly vigorously, sheer force of momentum may have adjusted her balance and even lessened her apparent weight. Soon there would be only gravity pulling at her. Pulling down.

Down. Far too far below, the hard ground waited. ...

How *did* one abseil down through midair? I'd watched enough junglejacks doing it that very afternoon! One of them had gripped the rope with his feet and had slid down while standing upright. Another had wound it around one thigh; and a third fellow around both thighs, with the free end tossed over his shoulder. Those two had descended as if they were sitting in a chair. The fastest junglejack of all, a woman, had simply slipped the rope through her crotch, under one buttock and up over her neck.

I settled on the double-thigh rappel. It had looked reasonably safe, and within my ability. Laying the coil across the branch before me. I let out spare rope and looped this around my thighs and over my shoulder.

I realized that I couldn't just toss the rest of the coil overboard. I might knock Marcialla off her perch, and so undo everything. So I paid the rope down; and it was just as well that I did. By the time I had let it all down I knew that the weight of it, tumbling all at once, could easily have yanked me off my branch.

The end of the rope was fairly near the ground; though from as high up as this it was hard to gauge "fairly near." Ten spans short? Fifteen, even?

Then I went over the side.

Almost, I tipped backward out of the rope; but I recovered myself. And now the rope squeezed me like a tourniquet. It gripped my breeches so tightly that far from tending to slide down like greased lightning, to my surprise I could hardly move at all. But then I recalled how the junglejack using this



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particular rappel had seemed to hump himself up "in the saddle" when letting out slack, so that he lowered himself jerk by jerk. I did so, too. Down I went, bit by bit: dropping, jerked to a halt, dropping again.

It wasn't too far to the trapeze seat. I caught hold as gently as I could, steadied it, transferred my hold to Marcialla.

I was face to face with her, staring right into her eyes. She hardly blinked at all. Her pupils were dilated. Her lips moved slightly but she said no words — she only uttered a long moan. Perhaps this *was* a word, after all. But she was taking too much time over it.

I said slowly, "I'm taking you down. Let go of the ropes. *Let go.*"

For a while she seemed to be holding on as tightly as before.

"They gave you the fungus drug," I said. "The drug that stops time. I know they did. Let go. You'll be safe." No doubt this was a wildly optimistic promise. But there was no alternative.

Not at the time. It did occur to me later on that a better and less adventurous bet might have been to persuade some of the jungle-guild marshals that what was going on up the tree was far from ordinary; and so have them send experienced climbers aloft. But at the time I was remembering what Jambi had said about marshals not interfering. Besides, *I* knew what had been said in the Jingle-Jangle; they didn't. And then again, this seemed to me to be a riverguild matter.

Slowly Marcialla's grip did slacken. Maybe she had been sending signals to tell her fingers to unlock ever since I reached her. At last she came away — and thank the River that she wasn't any heavyweight! I hauled her awkwardly across my lap. The rope kept her pressed to my chest and tummy.

Now I had to heave our combined weight up while paying spare rope over my shoulder. When I slid, my right hand had to act as brake and anchor overhead.

It took a long time to descend. And it was a descent into worse and worse pain.

By the time we reached the bottom of the rope I could have screamed. My right arm was almost out of joint. My hand was rubbed raw and bloody; it hurt as if I'd held it in a fire. If Capsi had felt one-half of this pain throughout his body ... I put the thought away.

Even at the bottom of the rope I was still too high. Not too high to stop me from jumping and landing springily — if I'd been on my own. I wasn't. First, I would have had to drop Marcialla like a sack of potatoes.

Luckily by now someone had realized that this wasn't just a spectacular display of amateur treetop rescue. Marshals appeared beneath, stretching out a webvine net.

"Let go of her! We'll catch!"

I did. And they did, too; then they hurried the sagging net aside. I hung slumped in the rappel, letting my



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agonized right hand relax at last. Quickly they bundled Marcialla out of the net and stretched it again, for me.

"You, now! Drop!"

So I paid the last few spans over my shoulder, and fell. They caught me, lowered me quickly.

They had laid Marcialla on the ground. A marshal was kneeling by her, feeling her pulse. He looked puzzled that she was so obviously wide awake, but didn't move. A whole little crowd had gathered round — foremost among whom I now spotted Lalo and Kish.

"Your friend over there ...," began one of the marshals, nodding in Lalo's direction, "She—"

Lalo ran forward.

"Thanks, Lalo!" I cried. I would have embraced her, except that my palm was running with blood.

"It's one way of making contact in a crowd, I'll say that! Your poor hand, Yaleen. What's it all about?"

"No time to tell! I must take Marcialla back to her boat, right now."

"It's the first-aid tent for *you*," insisted the marshal.

"No!" Then I really looked at my hand. "Yes. I suppose so. Will you two come with me?" I asked Lalo. "Will you help me get her back to the riverfront?"

Naturally enough, there were questions from the officials. But I bluffed my way through these as best I could while they were busy cleaning and anointing and bandaging me. Someone mentioned drug trances, but I pointed out that Marcialla obviously wasn't from Port Barbra. She was given to crippling attacks of vertigo, I said — which explained nothing: neither how she could possibly be a riverwoman, nor how she had got up the tree in the first place. However, they let me get away with my blatant lies. I think they had plenty of other business to attend to.

Briefly Lalo, Kish, and I debated the best way to shift Marcialla: borrow a stretcher, carry her between us, or what? I couldn't help much with my bandaged aching hand. Finally Kish hoisted Marcialla and slung her over his shoulder in a fireman's lift.

So, though not as swiftly as I would have liked, we returned to the old town. On the way there I swore Kish and Lalo to secrecy, and satisfied as much of their curiosity as I dared.

When we did at last get back to the *Spry Goose*, about an hour later, we found a strange situation indeed. Jambi had had the wit to pull up the gangplank — something I hadn't thought of in the heat of the moment. She and two other crew members were guarding the gunwales with belaying pins clutched in their fists; though it did look as though their confidence was waning rapidly, as the prospect loomed of an ignominious beaching for life. For Boatswain Credence was berating them from the dockside. As were three



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other crew-women who had turned up in the meantime. These were innocent of what was really going on; to them it looked like a mutiny. And meanwhile the two Port Barbra women slunk in the background shadows, scarfed and hooded. It was growing dark rapidly. Lamps had already been lit along the waterfront.

The situation clarified itself almost as soon as we hove into sight. Kish set Marcialla down, though he still had to balance her. The Port Barbrans whispered to one another, then took to their heels. After some hesitation — teetering between the chance of brazening it out further, and the prospect of what would realistically happen once Marcialla had regained her faculties — Credence shrugged and strode away; though with a show of dignity, I'll give her that.

The gangplank rattled down again onto the stone quay. Jambi and her two stalwarts looked almightily relieved.

We helped Marcialla slowly back on board her command. Shortly after that, the first rocket exploded high above the jungle, showering red and silver stars.

By midnight the distant pyrotechnics were all over, but ours were just commencing. Marcialla had speeded up. She pushed around her cabin, chattering, peering out of the porthole, pulling things out of drawers and stuffing them back in again, unlocking and relocking cupboards, scribbling illegibly on sheet after sheet of paper. We had to take the logbook off her to stop her from defacing it.

She sat down, she leaped up. She demanded hot snacks and more hot snacks, which a groaning cook provided, bleary-eyed, and which Marcialla wolfed down.

At one moment she wanted to run ashore to wake the quaymistress. At another she insisted on setting sail for Port Barbra at once even though it was pitch dark.

We used our initiative. Despite all her strident threats, appeals, and protests, we kept her confined to her cabin. Finally, around dawn, she flaked out at last. And Jambi and I could at last crawl to our own bunks.

When I woke up at last I could feel that the *Spry Goose* was out on the river. The light was dying fast, so I must have slept throughout the day. Jambi still lay stretched out, snoring. She only groaned when I shook her. My arms and shoulders ached like hell, and my right hand felt as if it were bandaged in concrete, not linen. I climbed back into the sheets again, and didn't wake until the following dawn. Since the *Spry Goose* had already been under way by evening, Marcialla was evidently made of sterner stuff than I — unless the aftermath of the drug delirium was kinder to the flesh than was the aftermath of abseiling from the heights.

* * *



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It's only in stories that a snip of a deckhand suddenly gets promoted to boatswain; and Marcialla wasn't as foolishly grateful as that, merely because I saved her life (perhaps), and because Credence had deserted.

By the time I came back up on deck again, Marcialla had already promoted Sula, from Gate of the South, to the post of boatswain. I couldn't help musing that slim, short Sula wasn't at all the sort of woman who could hoist a paralyzed boatmistress all the way up a tree and sit her on a trapeze! ("Let me have those about me that are slight," to parody the ancient fragment *Julius Czar.*)

Of course Marcialla did thank me, and grant me sick leave till my hand healed. No more painting or hauling on ropes for a while for Yaleen! Though actually this was a mixed blessing, since it meant that I had nothing to do but bum about the boat like a passenger, and watch the jungle pass by, and get in the hair of the cook by offering to help her one-handed. And all the while bottle up what had happened, like a dose of the black current.

I also had time to think about my fortune, as told by the Port Barbra woman. I had asked a few of the other women what they thought about cartomacy. (I hadn't asked Jambi, perhaps because I didn't want her to ask me in return what the cards had shown.) Only one woman thought anything at all about the matter, and what she thought was rather contradictory. On one hand, the cards would always tell a story that seemed plausible to the person concerned. But on the other hand, this story would be set out quite at random.

I puzzled about this and decided that the pictures on the cards were really so general that somebody other than I could have extracted an entirely different personal saga from the sequence of spy-glass, bonfire, and such. And I myself could very likely have picked nine other cards, and seen the very same story mirrored in them, too.

And yet ...

Even in their thumb-marked, washed-out dowdiness there had seemed to be something powerful about the cards, as though they and all their predecessors had been handled for so many centuries that, if there had been no truth in them to begin with, nevertheless by now the images they contained were fraught with generations of uneasy emotion. With each use — here and there, now and then — people put a tiny portion of their own lives and willpower into the images on the cards; and this mounted up eventually, so that the cards became, well, genuine.

We weren't sailing under very much canvas, as though now that we had left Jangali safely behind, Marcialla wished to prolong the time till we next made port. Realistically, of course, this allowed Marcialla to keep a leisurely eye on how well Sula was



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coping with the sudden change in her duties.

Just a couple of hours before we were due to reach Port Barbra, Marcialla called me to her cabin.

She poured us both a small glass of junglejack from an almost empty bottle.

"Oh, dear," said I, regarding it.

"It'll only go off. It doesn't travel." Marcialla smiled. "But you do, Yaleen. You get around. First of all, you were in the Jingle-Jangle that night—"

Hastily I raised my glass and gulped half of the stinging spirit down to prompt my cheeks to flush of their own accord.

"—then, up you popped at the top of that wretched tree, knowing just what was wrong with me."

"Well, you see, Lalo had mentioned the fungus drug, saying how it made time stand still — you remember Lalo and Kish? They were—"

"I remember. They *did* help me back to the boat."

"So when I saw you sitting as still as that in such a dangerous spot—"

"You put ten and ten together and made a hundred. And a hundred was the right answer. I've already thanked you for your prompt and loyal act of bravery, Yaleen. At the time it would have been ungracious to ask you ... why you eavesdropped on Credence and me." She waved a dismissive hand. "Oh, don't worry about that. I'm not offended. What I'm really interested in, being a guildmistress ..." And again she paused, but I only stared at her, waiting it out. Till she chuckled. "I think you ought to have expressed a degree of surprise there. You should have exclaimed, all wide-eyed innocence, 'Oh, are you?' "

"Word gets round," I mumbled; and I swallowed half of the remaining junglejack.

"As a guildmistress I have a duty to see that, how shall we put it ...?"

"The applecart isn't upset?" I oughtn't to have said this. Marcialla had practically forced me to complete her sentence for her, so long did she put off doing so herself.

"I was going to say: the order of things. Maybe you've heard people talking before about the balance of our little applecart ..."

This time I certainly did keep my lip buttoned.

"Well, whatever. I won't press you, since I'm grateful. Now I want you to swear that you'll say nothing at all about this particular insanity — this mad idea of doping the current — which is only really just a gleam in someone's eye, as yet." She reached for *The Book of the River* and the guild chapbook, both. "Otherwise people will begin to gossip. Other people overhear. Sooner or later some man starts to wonder, '*Shall* we try it?' Before we know where we are, we're deep in the manure."

"I already said something — to Jambi. And Lalo, too."



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"Oh, I don't suppose you told *everything*, did you?"

I swallowed. Not the junglejack this time. I swallowed saliva — and my heart.

What was "everything"? The drug? The observers at Verrino? The fact that Capsi had crossed the river without benefit of any crazy fungus drug, but by using a diving suit? The fact that over on the other side they burned women who loved the river — alive?

All these things together made up "everything." Surely even Guildmistress Marcialla had no way of knowing everything!

She peered at me quizzically. "You don't seem like a person who tells ... all they know."

I took the two books and laid my bandaged palm upon them, wondering vaguely whether this meant there was a cushion between me and my oath. "I swear I won't say anything about what Credence was up to. What she had in mind. May I spew if I do."

"As you have spewed before, I suppose ... Of course we must remember charitably that Credence was simply acting out of, shall we say, *devotion:* devotion to this river of women, and to the current that is its nervous system. Other people — men in particular — mightn't feel quite so devoted." Apparently satisfied, she took the books back and placed them on a shelf. "You've done well, Yaleen."

"Um, how did it feel when time stopped?" I asked.

Marcialla burst out laughing. "You're *impossible*, dear girl. But since you ask, it was ... interesting. Though not all *that* interesting, in the circumstances. Imagine wading through molasses for ten days. ... No, I can't really describe it. I suppose you're fascinated by the current, too? Yes, I can see you are. Most people take it for granted. You can never ignore it, if you're going to be a guildmistress." Her eyes twinkled. "That, incidentally, is *not* a promise."

And she went on to inquire in kindly tones about my hand...

And so to Port Barbra. After all the excitement and the omens in Jangali, I approached this town with some misgivings, as if I might at any moment be kidnapped by hooded women, and smuggled off into the depths of the jungle, dazed by drugs.

Not so, however. Neither on this first visit, nor on the several return visits the *Spry Goose* was to pay to Port Barbra during the next ten to twelve weeks. (For we started in on a local run: Jangali to Port Barbra to Ajelobo, and back again.)

Compared with massively stone-hewn and timber-soaring Jangali, Port Barbra seemed something of a fetid shanty town. The main streets were as muddy as the side lanes, though at least the major thoroughfares had wooden walkways along both sides, supported on stilts. Insects were a nuisance, not so much because they bit



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you, as that every now and then they liked to fly into your nostrils, making you snort like a horse on a foggy morning. I took to wearing a scarf, too, when I was in port; and a headscarf as well to keep them out of my hair.

Port Barbra exported precious timbers: the gildenwood, rubyvein, and ivorybone — all of which trees were small and required no heroic jungle-jack antics. However, the inhabitants used only cheap woods for their own buildings and furnishings. They built as though they intended to abandon the town as soon as they had all made their fortunes. Except that there were no fortunes in evidence. Frankly I wasn't surprised if in such a place a few people took drugs. And perhaps a town that is one large slum either gives up trying — or else it cultivates a certain mysticism and inwardness. Certainly, in their quiet murmurings and hoodedness, and in their apparent contempt for comfort or luxury, the Port Barbrans appeared to have adopted the latter course. Though of mystical extremes I saw nothing. Nor on any visit did I run into that fortune-teller — should I have recognized her, if I had! — nor Credence, either, supposing that she had made her way to Port Barbra with the help of her allies.

Naturally I wondered what *had* happened to Credence. On our first visit to Port Barbra, Marcialla spent a long while ashore closeted with the quaymistress. Subsequently I noticed many heliograph signals being flashed up- and downstream: signals that I couldn't work out at all. Days later when we were on the river again, more coded signals reached us, passed on by the boat behind. Later on I noticed Marcialla observing me with pursed lips when she thought I wasn't looking.

And so to steamy, bloom-bright, aromatic Ajelobo, a paradise compared with Port Barbra. ...

I could have settled happily in Ajelobo. Jumped boat, like Credence. Signed off. Ajelobo was so neat and ... yes, so innocent, at least on the surface.

The houses were all of light wood and waxed paper. There were hot springs just outside the town, where the population seemed to migrate en masse every weekend. Children, who were all dressed like flowers, flew kites and fought harmless little battles with them in the sky. Old men with little white beards played complicated board games employing hundreds of polished pebbles. There was a puppet theater, a wrestling stadium — for wrestling was a local passion — and dozens of little cafés where people talked for hours on end over tiny cups of sweet black coffee, one of Ajelobo's prime exports. There were even three daily newspapers turned out on hand-presses, filled with fantastic anecdotes; puzzles; serial stories; poetry; recipes; and elegant long-standing arguments by letter (about costumes, manners,



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turns of phrase, antiquarian fragments), which no one plunging into midway could hope to follow, but which regular readers savored with all the avidity of someone reading an adventure story. Of which, in fact, many of the most exotic were written and published in Ajelobo, and exported.

And maybe Ajelobo was all surface, and no depths.

But equally, who needs to settle anywhere — when every town along the river is their home, if they wish it to be?

It was during our fourth call at Ajelobo, as the year was drawing to a close, that Marcialla made her announcement to the boat's company. The *Spry Goose* was going to sail all the way to the source of the river, to the end of the world under the Far Precipices: to Tambimatu, in good time for New Year's Eve. And one of our own boat's company was to be honored — for good boatswomanship, and for initiative beyond the call of duty. She would be invited to volunteer to sail out to the black current at midnight, between the old year and the new.

Myself. I could have shrunk into my socks.

Not out of modesty, exactly. Let me be clear about that. Everyone loves an honor.

But because of the way it was phrased: "invited to volunteer." Could it be that the best way of keeping the applecart trim, when someone young and irresponsible knew something that they shouldn't know, was to ...?

No, it couldn't be that. More likely it was a neat way of making me feel extremely loyal — by putting me through an initiation ceremony, of the second degree.

Everybody on deck was staring at me.

I'd wondered before what a voice sounds like when it's quavering. If I was quavering when I replied, though, I wouldn't have known since I couldn't hear myself. "I volunteer," said I.

Hands slapped me on the back. Jambi kissed me on both cheeks. Sula pumped my hand; while Marcialla looked genuinely delighted and proud.

I still couldn't forget all those coded signals, and wondered whether any searching inquiries had been conducted not only about Credence and her affiliations but also about myself, for instance in Verrino ... turning up, perhaps, the fact that my brother appeared to have gone missing earlier in the year.

At this point I realized to my amazement that I had been chastely celibate for quite a long while. Whether this was somehow out of respect for my dead brother, or due to the horror at the male fraternity across the water, or even from perverse annoyance at my parents for breeding a new offspring, I had no idea. Maybe I had even been punishing myself by



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self-denial; and having effectively tortured my right hand on the abseiling rope at Jangali, I had had enough of it.

I determined to repair this omission before we set sail again. I must confess, too, that in one little part of me I was wondering whether I really would see the next year in, at all. Just in case not, I ought to enjoy some pleasures of the flesh.

So I drank Safe — not with Jambi, who ought to hunt down a languishing shore-husband, a married man, if she felt this way inclined — but with Klare, a jolly brunette from Guineamoy. It was she whom I had asked about the cards; and we went ashore together that night, the last night. As she put it, to celebrate.

I think I can say that we managed very well indeed. But one doesn't wish to boast of one's conquests. One shouldn't degrade men in their absence merely because we have liberty to roam, and they don't. So, like a proper lady of Port Barbra, I shall draw a discreet scarf and hood over a few very pleasant hours.

I was quite unprepared for my first sight of the Far Precipices. Fluffy white clouds with gray sodden hulls had been sailing along all day, occasionally emptying their bilges on us. For hours I'd been scanning the river and jungle horizon ahead for what I presumed would look like an enormous wall. It was sticky and far too hot, even on the river; the heat was soaking wet, unlike the dry heat of my native Pecawar.

Klare happened by, on some errand.

"Where, where, where?" I complained petulantly.

"Lost something, Yaleen?"

"Just the Precipices. Surely we ought to be able to see them by *now!*"

And she looked up into the sky — almost directly at the zenith, it seemed. The clouds had parted there; into that high rift she pointed.

"How about there?"

"Oh ... goodness me." For that's where the bare peaks of the Precipices were, all right. Up, up and up above me, scraping against space. I got such a shock. I simply hadn't realized. Of course if it hadn't been cloudy I should have known sooner. As it was, a god suddenly peered down at me from overhead. The tops of the Precipices seemed to be floating free with no possible connection to the ground.

Though these connections became evident enough by the time we reached Tambimatu. ...

Not so such a wall across the world — as the end of the world, period! A stone curtain, drawn across the rest of creation: one that hung from the stars themselves at night!

Forever it seemed to be toppling upon Tambimatu as though about to squash the town flat. Yet, the locals didn't see things quite that way. On the contrary, they hardly seemed to per-



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ceive the Precipices at all; any more than I had, when I looked for them in the wrong place. The town of Tambimatu was a tight maze of lanes and yellow brick houses leaning in toward each other with overhanging upper stories and machicolated attics. The idea seemed to be to nudge together and make tunnels of all the routes. From hardly anywhere in the town itself was it possible to see those looming Precipices. Domestically this interruption in the smooth flow of the world did not exist.

By this style of architecture the Tambimatans also excluded the reeking jungle that clung around their town. The dank, festering mass of vegetation was quite unlike the bloom-bright tangles I'd seen elsewhere, quite unlike the noble halls of jungle giants. Spinach puree: that was how I thought of it. A tide of green pulp a hundred spans high.

Naturally, for those who knew, there were ways through it. And there was wealth to find — or there wouldn't have been a town. The wealth consisted of powder-gold and gems and other exotic minerals that turned up in the slime-ponds and mud-pools; as if, every now and then, the Precipices nodded and a scurf of riches fell into the puree. Actually this wealth was thought to leach and cascade down through the innards of the Precipices, into the water table, whence it oozed up into the jungle. Bright jewels for mythical magpies — to make them build their nests here! In Tambimatu town were gemsmiths and goldsmiths, cutters and polishers, artificers of sparkling ornaments. Unlike the dowdy shrouded denizens of Port Barbra, these locals wore earrings and bangles and bijoux to match.

Slime and sharp facets; sparklers and gloomy mud!

Only from the quayside could the diligent eye follow the sweeping planes of stone upward into the clouds that so often clung to them — picking out precarious trees, at first like green chaff, then like threads. Then dust, then nothing.

Two leagues south of the town, the river emerged. ...

As a volunteer for the New Year's Eve voyage, first there was an obligatory call to pay on the quaymistress, in company with my sponsor, Marcialla. This was soon over. More a matter of checking in, really.

Next, there was a civic banquet in honor of all the volunteers.

Besides myself, there were six others. The boat we would sail to the black current was only, in truth, a little ketch. Perhaps this was to present a smaller profile. The ketch was rigged with a lot of little sails, the better to maneuver it when we got in close, and keep us from fouling it in the current. At present it rode at anchor a little way out, conveniently separating it from any male influence along the waterfront. The hull of the ketch was



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painted black. Its sails also were black. It looked like a fabled boat of death, for freighting corpses, perhaps to be set on fire and scuttled. An extendable boom jutted from one side, to carry the collection bucket...

But I'm digressing from the banquet.

It was there that I met my six new boatsisters for the first time — and took an instant dislike to three of them; which is a very high antipathy score for new acquaintances in my experience! Maybe these particular women were overproud, or pious, or otherwise screwed up by the honor bestowed on them. Maybe I was, too. Screwed up, that is. In any case I was younger than all the others, and thus may have seemed presumptuous. Bumptuous, even. Consequently I put them on edge, just as they put me on edge.

Two of the others were all right, I suppose, and fairly relaxed. And the last one I actually liked — and felt an instant sense of rapport with. She was called Peli, and hailed from Aladalia, which brought back happy memories. Peli was a burly woman in her thirties, with a mop of straw hair and a red weather-beaten face; or perhaps her blood pressure was unusually high. She was urgent, eager, informative, and talked very fast. However, she hastened to add, she was *not* artistic. Even so, she was the only one of us volunteers who had gone shopping in Tambimatu. Now she wore a coiled bangle that had cost her all of ten fish fifty (after bargaining). It must have been the only genuinely hideous gewgaw available in town. I loved her for it.

The banquet was held in the jeweler's guild hall, which doubled as a gem market at other times; however, on this occasion there were no men in sight, since this was women's business.

We mumbled words of introduction to one another; we drank to each other's health; we ate grilled fish. Then the quaymistress rose and read out all our citations to the assembled throng. Mine sounded distinctly icky, as though I had won my place simply by swarming around masts like a jackanapes. (No mention, of course, being made of *all* the circumstances.) And won it, too, for being a dab hand with the paintbrush. Since my hand was still visibly scarred, that seemed unlikely. "Someone's little favorite," I heard a voice mutter.

Afterward we drank more toasts, and generally failed to get to know each other; or at least that was my impression, Peli excepted.

No matter! The quaymistress of Tambimatu, organizer of the New Year's Eve events, announced a leisurely trip to the source of the river the next day so that we could frame up into a working team.

Leisurely, did I say? Well, yes, that's true. It was leisurely. The quaymistress



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accompanied us aboard the black ketch — which uniquely had no name whatever painted on side or stern, as though whatever was nameless could not be called out to, and compelled to come — and I have rarely before sailed more gently, except perhaps when we were idling away from Jangali after the fateful festival.

But otherwise! Maybe the quaymistress, as a local, could afford to be blasé about our journey. For me it was awesome, almost an ordeal of courage; though fascinating, too, in a nightmare way. Closer and closer we sailed to that seemingly infinite barrier, to the point where the river, which otherwise flowed through our lives unceasingly, was suddenly no more. Where the river ended, vanished. Or rather, where it all *began* — but began as if created out of nothing.

The waters slid forth like tongues out of a thick-lipped mouth. Stanchions of rocky support, like teeth, stood hundreds of spans apart. Surely the action of the water would wear these supports away eventually — and then the whole Precipice would fall on top of us! Perhaps today.

Away to the west the black current emerged through a narrower supporting arch. Yet, terms such as *arches* or *stanchions* convey the wrong impression. This suggests that the river was flowing from under a kind of bridge. In fact the cliffs extended right down to the surface of the water, and a little below, blocking any possible access or insight into what lay within this long hole in the Precipices. The supports were visible only because of bulges and ripples and what we could see through the dull glass of the water itself. So the river appeared to be oozing out of something solid — like the trail of slime behind a snail (only in reverse). Enormous snail, mighty trail!

I was glad that Peli was on board with me: she, so bluffy assertive — like the elder sister that I had never had. I was even gladder when we tacked about, almost within touching distance of the Precipices, to drift back toward the town.

The next day a kind of sacred conclave of the riverguild was held on board the schooner *Santamaria*, which was also riding at anchor. We lucky seven were invited.

Several guildmistresses were present, besides the quaymistress and Marcialla. (She and I rowed over together from the *Spry Goose*, with myself at the oars.) There followed solemn readings from the private chapbook of the guild; then practical tips, and cautions. I left feeling more chastened than when I had arrived, at the prospect of our holy and dangerous duty. I can't say that I also felt inspired, exactly.

The day after that was New Year's Eve.

So the seven of us set sail in that nameless boat an hour before midnight. It was a clear night. Stars stood gem-bright in one half of the sky. In



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the other half, nothing: nothing but a wall of darkness. It seemed to me as I hoisted a sail that the black wall was an image of the coming year, containing only the darkness of death. No phosphorescent little beasties silvered the water here. Half-starlight was our only guide; though we did have lanterns, if we chose to light them. We chose not to.

As we sailed out ever so slowly, I brooded much upon the current. Too much, perhaps. The others likewise. Our little ketch was eerily silent, as though we were all holding our breath. Silent, that is, until Peli called out, "How about a song?"

"Be quiet!" hissed someone.

"The current doesn't have ears, dear!" And Peli began to warble one of our river songs out over the lonely, deaf waters:

*The river*
*Is the giver*
*Of life,*
*Water-wife—!*

No, Peli definitely was *not* artistic. Tone-deaf, in fact. Though doubtless the tune she was singing sounded fine in her own head.

"Silence!" called the thin woman from Spanglestream who was nominally in command. "The current can sense vibrations."

Does it? Did it? I brooded some more.

We finally hove to within fifty spans of that deeper darkness that cleaved the dark waters. We dropped a drift-anchor. A lookout watched anxiously lest we glide closer, trailing drogue or not.

"Yaleen," came the thin woman's order, "extend the boom as far as it'll go. Peli, on the winch. Andra, prepare to receive the first bucketful. Salandra ..." Something else.

So I guided the first bucket, with its self-sealing lid, on the long boom out above the edge of the current, and waited for word to dunk the pail in and haul out a portion of the black substance.

"All ready?"

"Aye."

"Aye."

"Aye."

"Lower away."

And the bucket smacked into the current. ...

Madness seized me then.

Insanity rushed over me like flames. I still knew what I was doing. But why I was doing it, I had no idea. Nor had I any choice in the matter. It was as though that pack of fortune cards had sucked me into them, and imprisoned me in a picture! I still remember perfectly well how I scrambled up on the gunwale where the base of the boom was secured. I even heard Peli cry out to me, though I couldn't heed her. I even felt the brush of her fingertips as she tried to snatch me back to safety. I even heard the thin woman shout, "No! If it wants one of us, let it!" It made no difference.



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Heedless, I ran along that slim boom outstretched across the water — like an acrobat. But no acrobat was I. No way could I pause in my rush. No way could I pivot and return, had I wished to. As it was, I had no wishes of my own. Only my mad forward momentum kept me from toppling into the river before I even reached the current. But keep me it did; and I raced all the way to the end of the boom — and beyond. For a moment it even seemed that I was running onward through midair. But I fell, of course. And was engulfed.

Questing shapes swam round me; flashes of light dazzled me; soft tentacles slid up my nostrils, down my throat, and elsewhere, too — they entered every opening in me. But I did not feel that I was suffocating, or drowning.

Yet, my life flashed by me willy-nilly. Scenes of girlhood in dusty Pecawar. My initiation when I drank of the black current. My deflowering by Hasso in his attic bower. Verrino and its observers. Bonfires on the farther bank. ... All my secrets, all.

It was as if I had fallen asleep. And dreams had come to me. Yet not for my entertainment. They came to examine me, to walk around inside my skull and see what was there.

"*Yaleen,*" sang the dreams. "*Yaleeeen!*" they wailed.

I was aware of something immense and old and ... I could not say whether it was wise as well.

It had been watching us, though not with eyes. Rather with little cells of itself that migrated through us, flavoring us and savoring us before returning whence they came.

It had been feeling us, though not with fingers. Yes, with *vibrations.* I didn't understand what kind of vibrations they were.

Or was this simply what I had already been told about the current? What I had mused about it? And now it was reading my musings back to me?

How could I separate myself from this strange state I was in — so as to know which was *me,* and which was *it?* I focused, like a dreamer trying to awaken in a dream and be aware: not of the ordinary waking world outside, but of the world of the dream itself. I thought fiercely:

*What are you?*

And stars burned bright, and a world turned round underneath me, seen from so high in the sky that the world was only a ball, a plaything, a toy; and the sky was not blue but black.

*What are you?* I thought again, twice as fiercely — having no way to cry aloud.

And far away I heard a slurred voice:

*The Worm of the World I am. There is no other worm greater. The worm moves not; it flows within itself. On the day when it shall move, the whole world will turn upon its hinges. ...*



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*Till then, the worm shall watch ... the flow of things.*

*Of Woman, and Man ...*

Silence.

*But why? How? Who—?*

Something hidden reared and coiled around me. And within me, too, it coiled: it coiled around my mind. Crushing, suffocating, erasing. As I sank into oblivion I thought that I felt some other different creature — huge, slippery, and scaly — rise beneath me.

To my surprise, I woke to light and life.

I was soaking wet. Lying on a shelf of mud.

Raising my head, I saw spinach puree all before me, tangled up with tropic trees. One of my cheeks blazed as if I had been punched. The back of my right hand pulsed from the red weal of a stinger. But that was all there was, in the way of pain.

Pushing my palms into the mud, I doubled up, knelt — and looked behind me. Almost lapping the toe caps of my boots flowed the river.

I rose, to stare out over the waters. Far away — so far that they just had to be beyond the black current — I made out the sails and masts of a boat. A boat that could only be on the eastern side of the waterway.

And shivering in spite of the sticky heat, I knew that I was on the western bank. The sun was halfway up the sky. It was New Year's Day, and I was still alive. And I was all alone.

The black current had taken me and squeezed me through its substance — and its substance likewise through me — and then discarded me. I had been washed up on the far shore. Borne here by some giant fish of the depths, perhaps; a fish commissioned to carry me. ...

My first rational thought was to try to swim back to the eastern bank. Ignoring all stingers, since there didn't seem to be many hereabouts. Ignoring the black current. Crashing through it regardless. I would wave and shout, and be picked up by some passing vessel. Alternatively I would swim all the way.

I even went so far as to wade into the water, up to my ankles.

This frantic nonsense soon gave way to reality. I contented myself with quickly washing my hands clean of mud, retreated, and thought about my predicament.

Eventually I decided that my only hope was to walk to the area opposite Verrino, where Capsi had first signaled to the watchers up the Spire.

I could search for his diving suit and antistinger mask. He must have cached them thereabouts. Maybe I could use them. Maybe the suit and mask were still where he had hidden them. No Westerners ever willingly strayed near the water. Except for river-witches.



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And maybe the Sons of Adam had tortured the whereabouts out of him, and burned his equipment, too. ...

If I signaled with a mirror or a piece of broken glass, surely the observers would see me from Verrino Spire! Only they, along the whole length of the river, would be looking for a signal from this side. Or if not actually expecting one, patient enough and obsessive enough to look out in any case.

Verrino! My only hope lay there: the only hope that I could tease out of this horror.

And here was I, opposite Tambimatu in the spinach jungle. Verrino was 440 leagues away — a distance rather more than half the length of the river.

Nevertheless, I set out.

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# Letters

## Fantasy and the IRA

"Fantasy" is certainly an apt word for Gil Fitzgerald's "The Vengeance of Nora O'Donnell," in the April, 1983 issue of *Fantasy and Science Fiction*. The raising of the dead depicted in the story has more factual basis than the author's portrayal of the conflict between the IRA and the British Army: as a noble struggle for Irish freedom.

In reading the story, one might be led to believe that the Irish people support the IRA. This is simply not true. The Republic of Ireland has denounced the IRA and jailed its members in that country. The majority of the people of Northern Ireland — of any religion or heritage — prefer to be part of the United Kingdom than reunite with the Republic. This has been demonstrated in many elections and public referendums.

In Fitzgerald's story, Nora says to Baldwin, "You'll shoot me as you shot my husband. It takes such courage to kill an unarmed man or a defenseless woman." IRA members exhibit this same courage when they bomb stores in Belfast, assassinate British public figures, and kill innocent bystanders in acts of terrorism.

Mr. Fitzgerald's perceptions of Ireland seem to have come from his "Irish oral tradition." My perceptions of Ireland come from the victimization of my family in Belfast by the IRA. My relatives' businesses have been bombed. Another was shot in the street by an IRA member — because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. The "heroes" that Mr. Fitzgerald glorifies are not the saviors of Ireland, they are butchers.

—JOHN M. WHITESIDE

## SF and the nursing profession

"A Scent of the Soul" by Chet Williamson (August, 1983) was a cheap shot at the nursing profession. We nurses are not lazy, weak-stomached, sex-crazed, murdering types. If we were, we would not be nurses in the first place.

We try to help the dying patient right up to the last, and to support his family before and after the death. Believe me, there is no thrill for a nurse when a patient dies. About the most we can hope for is a sense of satisfaction from keeping him as relatively pain-free, dignified, and unafraid as possible during his last weeks or days. I've always found it difficult to let them go; I can't imagine myself or any other nurse doing anything to hasten the end of a patient.

I think Williamson's story does a disservice to your readers as well as to the nursing profession. Anything that undercuts health care providers will eventually filter down and be detrimental to the people they are trying to help.

It is better, I think, to support the people such as nurses who are working hard to support others. It is better to approach death with respect — and



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not make it into a vulgar premise for a short story. (Lord knows there are enough *genuinely* vulgar topics around these days.)

Having said that, I'll add that Williamson is a powerful writer. He sent vivid word pictures into my mind, and tingled my spine from the first cervical vertebra down to the sacral promontory. I'm looking forward to his next story — but I do hope for a different choice of content.

—ELIZABETH KNOWLES BEARD

**Offensive stereotypes**

I have been a faithful reader of F&SF for some twenty-four years, so it is with regret that I must ask you to cancel my subscription. I take this action because Baird Searles' reviews in the July and now in the August issue contain a racial stereotype so offensive to me that I no longer open the magazine with pleasure, but rather with trepidation.

I wrote a letter to the editor on June 2, expressing my disgust at Searles' description of a character as "a thoroughly unpleasant bitch, a Jewish American princess who doesn't happen to be Jewish or American." I do not know what the disposition of my letter was. I do know that when I opened the August issue, I found another review by Searles, of the same program, in which he refers to "Princess Ariel's self-centered JAP act."

Since to my recollection I have never encountered equivalent stereotypes about blacks, Hispanics, or other ethnic groups in the pages of your magazine, I must conclude that F&SF distinguishes between "acceptable" and "unacceptable" racism. I do not. Therefore, as of this date, I am terminating my subscription.

—JEFFRY V. MALLOW

*Baird Searles replies:*

*Perhaps Mr. Mallow would have been less offended had he known the origins of the concept of the Jewish American Princess, which was defined by the talented New York Jewish group of writers in the 1950s. The best known examples are probably Herman Wouk's* Marjorie Morningstar *and the heroine of Philip Roth's* Goodbye, Columbus. *From there it was accepted by Jews* and *Americans* and *Jewish-Americans as a humorous label for a behavioral type, as opposed to stereotype, which implies a generality the term has never had. Analogously, the "up-tight New England WASP," about whom we've heard a lot, hardly applies to all New Englanders or WASPs. The JAP is not necessarily Jewish* or *American, for that matter, as I noted in the first piece in question.*

**A pre-emptive strike**

It has occurred to me that your book editor, the wonderful Mr. Budrys, must by now have offended a sufficient number of people as to endanger his employment. Faced with the possibility of awakening to a world in which Mr. Budrys does *not* review books (a world, indeed, in which all credit would be due to the cliché but lamentable habit of the approving majority to remain silent), I have deter-



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mined to voice my objections in a preemptive strike. If he does get fired, It won't be because *I* didn't write.

Algis Budrys is the clearest literary voice your country has, not even excepting William Safire. His content may be contentious; he may be wrong; however, his manner of challenging both reader and author alike by consistently removing his remarks from the mere work in question into the larger political issues must be defended at all costs. My bell was rung on page 19 of the January 1983 issue and although I cannot agree totally with his conclusions, I am more than ready to die for his right to call academia "utterly worthless."

Cut the fiction, cut the ads. Cut even Dr. Asimov's monthly sermon. Should you ever *think* of cutting one paragraph of Mr. Budrys I will do more than merely cancel my subscription; I will annul it.

—KEVIN ANDREW CADLOFF

**Commitment to fine writing**

Your March issue of *F&SF* was superlative, especially the anchor stories at the beginning and end. The Reaves story on Graymare House demonstrates that modernist techniques remain alive and well in SF. It is not exactly that the fabulistic devices in the ghost story are derivative but rather that good plotting, thematic coherence, and fine-tuned syntax are needed to tell any type of a good yarn. I am interested in how Reaves manages to string together so many very short sentences in such a fluid manner. As a linguist and professor of English, I constantly have to remind my students that short choppy sentences do not constitute a readable norm. The coherent manner in which Reaves uses pronouns and prepositions, of course, makes the difference between primer prose and fast-paced dramatic action, especially in the final scene. Excellent.

Mr. Robinson's "Black Air" demonstrates how an author who maintains control of a specialized diction, here the lexicon of ships and the sea, can efficiently move a reader around in time and space. Robinson "gets it right." His description of the North Sea, the "color of flint" and cold as "iron water," remind me of when I was in the Orkneys and went swimming in that forbidding environment. Robinson's narrative brought back those visceral feelings with a rush. This time, though, it was pleasurable. What Wordsworth said about poetry is also true of good prose in being "strong emotion recollected in tranquility."

The high quality of *F&SF* of late leads me to suggest perhaps there could be a column or series of short essays on stylists, techniques, aesthetic problems, current trends in fabulation, etc. I don't mean to suggest heavyweight lumps such as appear in *Extrapolations*, nor naively "faanish" dreck, but rather the readable criticism which sometimes appears in say Geis' *Science Fiction Review*. For example a short essay on *onomastics*, the theory and practice of naming, might enrich and deepen readers appreciation of stories such as Robinson's and Reaves' in your March issue. Or, another example, why are P.K. Dick's characters named so differently than other stylists? As other



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prozines seem to be skewing their columns and advertising towards the gaming trend, I think it would be appropriate to re-assert *F&SF's* commitment to fine writing and its appreciation.

—JOHN W. TAYLOR

**Nuclear garbage?**

I just finished reading the story Cenotaph by Richard Mueller (June 1983) and I am surprised and disappointed that a reputable science fiction publication would publish such trash. Science fiction writers (at least those of a few years ago) generally were reasonably well-versed in science and while their stories were highly imaginative and dealt with "science" not yet known, at least they didn't include scenarios which defied the known physical laws. Mr. Mueller shows his ignorance (I use that word not as an insult, but as a description) of nuclear research reactors throughout his highly distorted story. His descriptions of Windscale (not Windsail), of the shipping incident, of the reactor explosion, and of the effects of radiation are pure garbage.

Stories such as this one don't entertain, they scare people, particularly when they refer to a real facility. Research reactors cannot blow up — that is a fact — not an opinion. It is truly unfortunate that you have allowed you publication to be used as a forum for a clearly anti-nuclear and politically oriented scare tactic. I am particularly shocked to see such a story in a publication which lists Isaac Asimov ( a distinguished and very knowledgeable scientist) as its Science Consultant.

Perhaps in the future, you will demand a higher level of knowledge and integrity than that shown by Mr. Mueller.

—WALTER F. WEGST, PH.D.
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Occupational Safety
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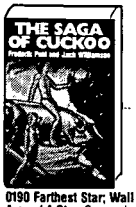


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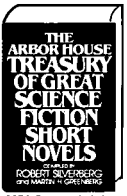


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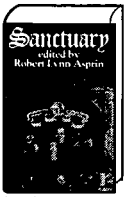


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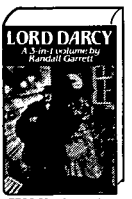


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About every 4 weeks (14 times a year), we'll send you the Club's bulletin, *Things To Come*, describing the 2 coming Selections and a variety of Alternate choices. In addition, up to 4 times a year you may receive offers of special Selections, always at low club prices. If you want the 2 Selections, you need do nothing; they'll be shipped automatically.

If you don't want a Selection, prefer an Alternate, or no book at all, just fill out the convenient form always provided and return it to us by the date specified. We allow you at least 10 days for making your decision. If you do not receive the form in time to respond within 10 days and receive an unwanted selection, you may return it at our expense.

As a member you need take only 4 Selections or alternates during the coming year. You may resign any time thereafter or continue to enjoy Club benefits as long as you wish. One of the 2 Selections each month is only $3.98. Other Selections are higher, but always much less than hardcover publishers' editions — up to 65% off. A shipping and handling charge is added to all shipments. Send no money now, but mail the coupon today!

**Note: Prices shown are publishers' edition prices.**
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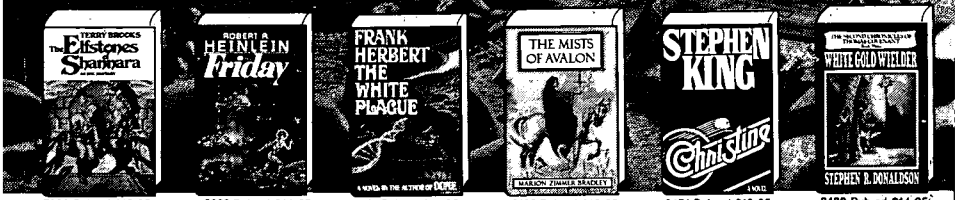


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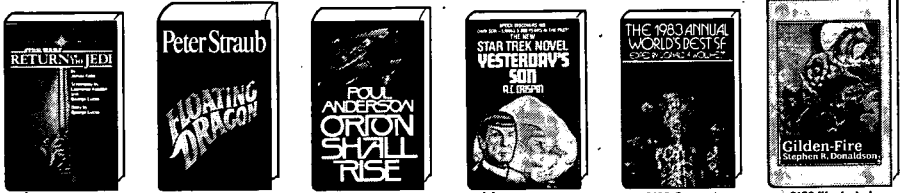


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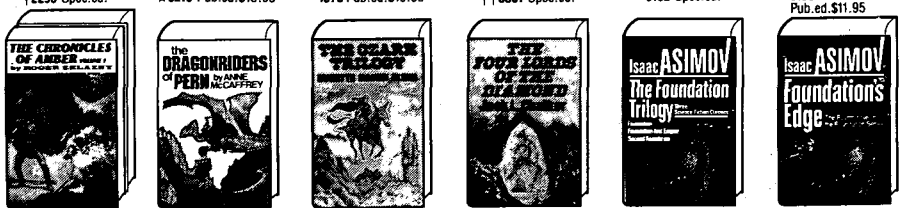


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